

CONWY

- Early history of the town

Conwy, like Caernarfon along the coast, is one of Edward's most celebrated castle-towns. It also shares a similar position, on sheltered coastal waters and at the mouth of a small river, in this case the tidal shore of Afon Conwy at the point where Afon Gyffin enters it. Again the site was also already occupied before Edward's new town was built, not by a Welsh settlement but a monastic foundation, a Cistercian abbey of St Mary founded around 1192 that had been moved there from near Caernarfon.¹²⁶ The Welsh princes had used the abbey as a burial place during the thirteenth century, and nearby stood their hall, later called Llywelyn's Hall.¹²⁷ In March 1283, the English forces had arrived at Aberconwy.¹²⁸ Within a year a new town was laid out around the abbey church (which remained), and the king's castle and the town's defences were under construction. All this required negotiation with the incumbents of the abbey, and following consent for their removal to a place further upstream along the Conwy river, at Maenan in Rhos, their new abbey was inaugurated in the king's presence at Eastertide 1284.¹²⁹

The abbey's buildings were used from the start in the building of the new town and castle. In March and April 1283 the king's men stored their valuables there, as well as weapons and stores.¹³⁰ Preliminary work took place during the spring and into the early summer. In June, a site was cleared to accommodate the king's tents and pavilions near the old abbey, and work began on building a new mill, a granary, and also a timber-built palisade around the whole works 'to enclose the site of the new town'.¹³¹ Such palisades are known to have been used to protect the initial groundworks of Edward's other castle towns, such as Caernarfon and Rhuddlan. Its presence here at Conwy in June 1283 suggests that decisions had by then been taken about the areal extent the new town would occupy. Meanwhile, the king was using Llywelyn's Hall as lodging, at least until a new hall and chambers were ready for he and the queen, she having her own accommodation by June, complete with a newly turfed lawn.¹³² Work on the king's chambers, and the castle and town, was under the overall direction of Master James of St George, the chief architect, and John of Candover, who was clerk of the works.¹³³ Others were also involved at Conwy at this time. John de Bonvillars, a knight of the king's household, played a role for example, while in March of that year Peter of Brampton and Master Richard the Engineer were busy recruiting workers such as diggers and masons for the ditches and walls to be made.¹³⁴ In June the following year, 1284, a survey of the new works was conducted by William of Louth, one of the king's most senior household clerks.¹³⁵ With the preliminaries completed building-

¹²⁶ S. Toy, 'The town and castle of Conway', *Archaeologia* 86 (1936), pp.163-93.

¹²⁷ Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.114; RCAHMW, *An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments in Caernarvonshire*, volume I: east, the cantref of Arllechwedd and the commote of Creuddyn (HMSO, London, 1956), pp.39, 57.

¹²⁸ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.45.

¹²⁹ CWR, p.285; Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.46-7; RCAHMW, *Caernarvonshire*, i, pp.1-2.

¹³⁰ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.46.

¹³¹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.46.

¹³² Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.46.

¹³³ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.49. On Master James see Taylor, 'Master James of St George'.

¹³⁴ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.49. On Bonvillars see A.J. Taylor, 'Who was 'John Pennardd, leader of the men of Gwynedd?', *English Historical Review* 91 (1976), pp.79-97.

¹³⁵ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.50; T.F. Tout, *Chapters in Administrative History of Mediaeval England. The Wardrobe, the Chamber and the Small Seals*, volume II (Manchester University Press, London, 1920), pp.14-15.

work was advancing well on both castle and town defences by the time Master James and John of Candover received £5819 14s for payment of men and materials over the first two years, covering the period up to November 1284.¹³⁶

By early autumn 1284 Edward's new town and castle of Conwy had taken shape and was ready to take in new inhabitants. As if to mark the end of this first phase in the town's formation, the king chartered Conwy as a 'free borough' in September 1284, granting it privileges that were also shared by other Edwardian new towns in north Wales, including Rhuddlan, Flint and Caernarfon, which likewise received charters at the same time.¹³⁷ Conwy's burgesses were given the right to every year 'choose two proper bailiffs from themselves', and on the feast of St Michael 'present them to the constable [of the castle] as mayor', as well as to 'have a guild merchant'.¹³⁸ A clause was also inserted to attract new settlers to come and live there.¹³⁹ The privileges were based on those of the city of Hereford, while Conwy's charter was subsequently used as a model for the one granted to Beaumaris in 1296.¹⁴⁰ The number of burgesses actually arriving in the town at this early date is not known but those that were taking up residence there would have seen construction work continuing on the stone walls around the town and the castle. Along the north side of the town between November 1284 and November 1285, £472 10s 4d was spent constructing 'a portion of the town wall and its ditch', the work being done under the direction of Master James by John Flauner of Boulogne.¹⁴¹ Architectural details show that this stretch of wall and that on the west side of the town were completed at around the same time, while the southern stretch of the walls, together with Mill Gate, Upper Gate and a tower by the castle that stood in the river were all built in 1285-6, along with excavations to create a rock-cut ditch around both the castle and the town.¹⁴²

Within three years of work starting on the site, Conwy was thus more or less a completely walled town, with strongly-built stone defences, fortified by gates and ditches, and containing not just the castle but also dwellings for the king and the royal household, as well as houses for craftsmen such as Master James and other workers.¹⁴³ The castle itself was ready by 1291-2, and Arnold Taylor calculates that the overall cost of building it and the town walls was £14,500.¹⁴⁴ Shortly after this date comes the first record of the townspeople's properties at Conwy. A survey of the town was carried out around 1295 and records that there were then 112 burgages, occupied by a total of 99 burgesses.¹⁴⁵ Some of the burgesses held properties that comprised more than one burgage, such as William of

¹³⁶ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.49.

¹³⁷ CChR 1257-1300, pp.276-8.

¹³⁸ CChR 1257-1300, p.277.

¹³⁹ The clause stated that 'If any man's bondsman shall dwell in the town and hold land there... for a year and a day without being claimed... he shall remain a free man in that town'. CChR 1257-1300, p.277.

¹⁴⁰ See 'Beaumaris'.

¹⁴¹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.50. During this same period £3313 1s 2d was paid out for the works in all, bringing the then overall total for construction costs up to £9132 15s 2d.

¹⁴² Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.51-53, 55. By September 1286 the total cost of work had risen to £11, 285 11s 5d. William Barber and Richard of Roding received £6 16s 0d for their work on four perches of ditch by the north-west angle tower, while Walter of Roding and six other men received £16 16s 0d for eight perches for the section of ditch by Upper Gate. A perch was sixteen and a half feet.

¹⁴³ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.52-3, 55; for the town walls see RCAHMW, *Caernarvonshire*, i, pp.55-7.

¹⁴⁴ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.58.

¹⁴⁵ J. Griffiths, 'Documents relating to the early history of Conway', *Transactions of the Caernarfonshire Historical Society* 8 (1947), pp.6, 7-10. No date is given but Griffiths suggests that the survey 'was probably drawn up before 1295' (p.5).

Westgate who had two 'integrated' burgages, and John of Bristol, whose property was one and a half burgages wide and two in depth.¹⁴⁶ This suggests a fluid property market from quite an early date, with burgages being amalgamated, sub-divided and exchanged by the burgesses, as was their right under the laws of Hereford. The dimensions of these plots is not stated, but there was probably a standard burgage size at Conwy as the rental notes if a property had gained or lost any extra length or breadth, the differences being recorded in feet. For example, Henry Baldwin had one whole burgage except for three feet in width, while Hugh le Barber had half a burgage with five feet extra in front.¹⁴⁷ It is as if the plots had originally been laid out to one size but were subsequently altered, by their tenants, by adding or subtracting a few extra feet here and there. The fact that the rental records such minor differences in the sizes of the burgages goes to show how much attention was paid to the boundaries of urban property holding, even in a small town like Conwy, as well as how carefully such measurements were made.

The 1295 rental provides some interesting insight into the social make-up of early Conwy. In particular, some of the burgesses' surnames reveal where they had originated from, such as Henry of Faversham, Roger of Lewes, John of Oxford, William of Nottingham and Robert of Northampton.¹⁴⁸ Judging by the geographical spread of the places represented by burgesses' names, the new town at Conwy had great pulling power, attracting immigrants from southern and eastern England, rather than the mainly midland and Welsh border areas that early migrants to Aberystwyth and Caernarfon seem to have come from.¹⁴⁹ Some of the town's inhabitants recorded in 1295 were those involved in the works on the town and castle, such as Jules of Chalons, a mason who worked with John Francis in early 1286 on the southern section of the town walls.¹⁵⁰ This close association between inhabitant burgesses and local craftsmen was seemingly quite typical for Edward's new towns at his time.¹⁵¹ Unfortunately the rental itself does not provide sufficient details from which to locate whereabouts in the town the various burgesses lived, though one or two clues are given, such as Roger le Porter's burgage in the 'town's market', and Radulf de Ocle's burgage 'towards the upper gate'.¹⁵² That immigrants were continuing to arrive in Conwy is shown by a later rental, of 1305 or 1306, by which time there are 109 burgesses recorded in the town.¹⁵³ After this, in 1312, there were 124 burgages recorded, making Conwy second in size only to Beaumaris, compared with Edward's other new towns established after the 1282-3 war.¹⁵⁴ Judging by the amount of money he was willing to spend on its construction, the king must have had high aspirations for the place, and in this context it is perhaps no surprise that the town was relatively large. The larger the town the higher its revenue for the exchequer, so no doubt, considering the costs which the construction had incurred, the apparent early success of Conwy was met with some relief by the Crown, for the rents the burgesses paid went to the king's coffers, 'an annual rent of about £5 12s od' in the early 1290s.¹⁵⁵ A small but useful contribution towards the £14,500 it had cost to build the new town and castle.

¹⁴⁶ Griffiths, 'Early history of Conway', pp.7-8.

¹⁴⁷ Griffiths, 'Early history of Conway', pp.9-10. There are many other examples of this in the rental.

¹⁴⁸ Griffiths, 'Early history of Conway', pp.7-8. Other examples can be found.

¹⁴⁹ See 'Aberystwyth'; 'Caernarfon'.

¹⁵⁰ Griffiths, 'Early history of Conway', p.8; Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.53.

¹⁵¹ See Williams Jones, 'Caernarfon', pp.80-1.

¹⁵² Griffiths, 'Early history of Conway', p.9.

¹⁵³ Griffiths, 'Early history of Conway', pp.6, 10-15.

¹⁵⁴ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.66.

¹⁵⁵ Griffiths, 'Early history of Conway', p.6.