

CONWY

- The town as it is today

The Edwardian town walls and castle at Conwy are designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site as at Caernarfon. It is still possible to walk along sections of the town wall, and from its parapet look down upon both the castle and town, as was done seven centuries ago. The impressive gradient of the wall as it rises up from the castle up to the north-west tower is clear, and this angle tower – as if standing at the bow of a ship – provides an elevated view back onto the town's streets and buildings below. The town's gateways are well-preserved too, though some holes were made in the walls in the nineteenth century to provide greater access into and through the town, including the new road and bridge constructed by Thomas Telford, and later on the line of the Chester-Holyhead railway, which breached the walls and with its station and deep cutting now occupy what would have been the western part of the walled town.

Today Conwy is a small and relatively quiet town, trading on its architectural heritage, with a population in 2001 of just over 4000 inhabitants.¹⁷⁰ Along High Street and Castle Street the town centre is busy with shoppers, while the quayside is still used by fishing boats. The streets and plots set out in 1283-4 remain the framework of the modern town. Most of the building façades along the town's streets are of the later eighteenth century onwards, but the castle, the town walls and gates, and the parish church of St Mary, as well as some domestic buildings in the town do date back to the middle ages, and no doubt behind the modern exteriors of some buildings are hidden much earlier cores.¹⁷¹ The plot boundaries evident especially along Castle Street are substantial structures themselves, and by walking along the northern stretch of town wall others can be seen in behind frontages along Chapel Street. Because the town declined in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, parts of the walled town, particularly along Upper Gate Street but also parts of Chapel Street, were abandoned and became gardens.¹⁷² A remarkable map of the seventeenth century shows very clearly how built up this area of the town once was,¹⁷³ but today it is occupied by rows of terraced housing that were built on the sites of the gardens in the nineteenth century. Even so, walking around the streets of the town today, along the town walls, the quayside, and around the churchyard, and looking down from the wall's towers and gates, Conwy still provides a good sense of the original size and character of one of Edward I's more successful new town ventures.

¹⁷⁰ The figure is for the ward of Conwy which covers a slightly larger area than the built-up town.

¹⁷¹ There are some surviving standing domestic buildings of late-medieval and early-modern date, most notably 'Aberconway' on the corner of Castle Street and High Street (possibly fourteenth century); RCAHMW, Caernarvonshire, i, pp.58-69. For the castle and church also see RCAHMW, Caernarvonshire, i, pp.39-57. More information on Conwy's historic buildings is to be found at www.coflein.gov.uk.

¹⁷² Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.114.

¹⁷³ Reproduced in W.J. Hemp, 'Conway castle', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 46 (1941), pp.169-9.