

FLINT

- Early history of the town

Of the new towns established by Edward in Wales in 1277, Flint was closest to England. Also, Flint occupied a 'greenfield' site, and hence was truly a 'new town' unlike the other two towns established after the first Welsh war, Rhuddlan and Aberystwyth. What it did share with them was its twin military and commercial function of a combined castle and town, situated on a coastal site with access to the sea, the Dee estuary in Flint's case. Even the place-name was new, possibly deriving from the town's site on a sandstone outcrop.¹⁹³ With its proximity to Rhuddlan, it is unsurprising that early work on the two places was overseen by the same individuals. William of Perton was keeper of works at both from July 1277, when work began Flint, while later that same year it was Nicholas Bonel who the king appointed as 'surveyor of his works in those parts, both at Le Cheynou [Flint] and at Rothelan [Rhuddlan]', along with Guncelin de Batelesmere, justice of Chester.¹⁹⁴ Perton had in fact set out from the king's court in June to recruit masons from eastern England and take them to Chester, from where, in July, they and others whom the king's clerks had gathered moved forward to a 'camp' on the Dee, the future site of Flint.¹⁹⁵ By the end of the month, 'approximately 1850 workman' were assembled there, and as Arnold Taylor puts it, were 'treated as a military unit', with the various categories of worker – engineers, diggers, carpenters, masons – being 'placed under a knight'.¹⁹⁶ The suggestion is that in this state the royal camp at Flint was simply 'a dispersal centre from which men were sent as needed to other embryo works', for example at Rhuddlan.¹⁹⁷

On the making of Flint itself, the earliest activity concerned the earthworks needed to defend the site. The work was noted by the Welsh. An entry for the summer months of 1277 in the *Brut y Tywysogyon* recorded that the king 'fortified a court at Flint with huge ditches around it'.¹⁹⁸ These huge ditches are presumably the double-bank and ditch earthworks shown on John Speed's 1610 map of the town. Royal accounts for August 1277 refer to workmen engaged on ditches at Flint (and Rhuddlan), and early on in the month Master William of March arrived there with 300 diggers from eastern parts of England, men who were no doubt well-used to earthmoving and ditch-digging in draining the fens there.¹⁹⁹ Peter of Brampton, a knight, was responsible for the diggers working at Flint in July and August.²⁰⁰ Meanwhile, timber was also procured at this time for the castle and probably for a palisade to be built around the site, as was common in other of the king's works of this sort in Wales.²⁰¹ So, before the end of the summer, work was advancing at Flint, and during this time it would appear that the circuit of the future town's defences was established. By then the king was based at Rhuddlan, with his clerk William of Perton overseeing as keeper of works both Flint and Rhuddlan.²⁰² By the late autumn, Nicholas Bonel and Guncelin of

¹⁹³ Beresford, *New Towns*, p.39; Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.17, note 6. Flint means 'rock' in Old English.

¹⁹⁴ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.19, citing PRO: E 372/124, rot. 29; CWR, p.160, see also p.165.

¹⁹⁵ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.17, citing PRO: E 101/350/26, E 101/3/19; CPR 1272-81, p.213.

¹⁹⁶ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.17. 2300 men were present by the end of August (p.18).

¹⁹⁷ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.18. They also went to castle building projects at Builth and Ruthin.

¹⁹⁸ *Brut y Tywysogyon*, ed. T. Jones, p.267.

¹⁹⁹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.18, citing PRO: E 372/123, rot. 23.

²⁰⁰ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.49, citing PRO: E 101/485/19.

²⁰¹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.18-19.

²⁰² Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.19.

Batelesmere were there as the sites' surveyors. After this, early in 1278, the first references to the town at Flint appear.

In February 1278, Guncelin, along with Howel, son of Griffin, were given 'order to cause proclamation to be made that a market shall be held at Flint every week on Thursday', as well as an annual fair.²⁰³ At the same time, the two men along with Bonel were also appointed by the king 'to assess his burgages' at Flint (as well as Rhuddlan), 'and to grant and demise at a fixed rent all his lands in those parts'.²⁰⁴ The town by then was clearly in existence, presumably with its streets, plots, market and defences. The work on the castle was continuing, but more emphasis appears to have been placed on work at Rhuddlan's castle, at least initially, and only later, in November 1280, did Master James of St George begin working at Flint, and in 1281 'the biggest single advance of any in the progress of the Flint works' took place.²⁰⁵ In 1282, Master James along with William of Perton were given 'order to deliver to all wishing to have burgages or lands at Flynt one burgage and 40 acres of land', which was to be 'quit of rent for 10 years', after which a burgage rent would be sixpence per year.²⁰⁶ The long time-period that burgesses would be free of rent suggests that there was a need to attract incomers to take up property there, perhaps signs that the burgages that were being assessed back in February 1278 had not attracted many takers. Burgesses are mentioned in October 1283.²⁰⁷ Work was also apparently continuing on the defences around the town, for diggers were paid £200 between March 1281 and November 1286 to work on the town's enclosure.²⁰⁸ Of course it may be that Flint, like nearby Rhuddlan, had suffered in the Welsh attacks of March 1282,²⁰⁹ and required not only work on its defences but also some help to restore the town's population. Curiously, Flint does not get a 'charter of liberties' at the same time that Rhuddlan does, in November 1278, but only receives a charter, making it a 'free borough', in September 1284, when Rhuddlan likewise is given this status.²¹⁰ Are we seeing, then, two distinct attempts to get Flint off the ground as a town, one taking place in early 1278, and then a second in 1282? With the emphasis of castle-building switching more to Rhuddlan at this time, and with Edward's aspirations for Rhuddlan, perhaps Flint in 1278 was a less attractive looking proposition to would-be burgesses when compared with its near-neighbour. Indeed, this unevenness in the early development of the two towns may also be reflected in the fewer contemporary records of Flint compared with Rhuddlan, with the consequence that 'we cannot trace in such detail the settlement of Flint by the English'.²¹¹

If 1282 had been a difficult time for Flint, then more trouble was in store, for in the war of 1294-5 the town was damaged again. A letter sent from the burgesses to the king in 1296-7 records what happened: 'in the last war in Wales, the town of Flynt was burnt at the order of Sir Reginald de Grey for the safety of the castle, so that the Welsh could not have possession to do harm to the castle, and their goods and chattels were therefore destroyed',

²⁰³ CWR, p.165.

²⁰⁴ CWR, p.165.

²⁰⁵ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.19-21. Between August 1277 and December 1286, £6068 7s 5³/₄d was spent on the castle and town defences (p.25). See also J.G. Edwards, 'The building of Flint', *Journal of the Flintshire Historical Society* 12 (1951), pp.9-10.

²⁰⁶ CCLR 1279-88, p.172.

²⁰⁷ CPR 1281-92, p.82.

²⁰⁸ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.18, note 3.

²⁰⁹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.30.

²¹⁰ CChR 1257-1300, pp.209, 277.

²¹¹ *Flintshire Ministers' Accounts, 1301-1328*, ed. Jones, p.xl.

the damages amounting to £300.²¹² What is more, the burgesses complained in another letter of the same date, ‘the king’s Welsh villeins have bought land in the town and bake and brew, contrary to their charter and their custom’.²¹³ It seems, though, that the damage caused by the Welsh was more to do with the burgesses’ moveable wealth, rather than their landed property and houses, and that any necessary rebuilding of houses would be undertaken by the burgesses themselves. Just previously, in 1292, the town had seventy-six taxpayers, similar to Rhuddlan, and also paying about the same sum.²¹⁴ By the early fourteenth century, in the years between 1301 and 1306 for example, the royal exchequer was receiving just over £36 per annum in rents from the ‘vill of Flint’, slightly more than it got from Rhuddlan.²¹⁵ The actual number of burgages rented at Flint is not known, and neither is there a rental listing either the burgesses or their property. Flint’s early development in the first few decades after 1277 therefore appears to be characterised by somewhat slow and erratic growth, in terms of both population and prosperity, even though the place had a market operating from very early on, and despite burgages being made ready for occupants only six months or so after the site was first occupied by Edward’s men in the summer of 1277.

²¹² Calendar of Ancient Petitions, ed. Rees, p.177.

²¹³ Calendar of Ancient Petitions, ed. Rees, p.178.

²¹⁴ Beresford, *New Towns*, p.550.

²¹⁵ Flintshire Ministers’ Accounts, 1301-1328, ed. Jones, p.100.