

## HOLT

- The design and plan of the town

A further indication that Holt had connections with Edward's other towns in north-east Wales is to be seen in the layout of its plan. This requires some careful consideration, however. The town-plan of Holt comprises two broad streets, Church Street/Bridge Street and Cross Street/Green Street, which run in parallel almost due north-south between the site of the castle and the river. Placed halfway along these two streets is an open space, more or less rectangular in shape, opposite the entrance to the parish church of St Chad, located on the east side of the town.<sup>270</sup> These two main streets were once greater in width, as is indicated on the 1840s Tithe Award map (indicated, too, by the set-back building frontages along the streets). The southern end of the main streets is defined by a cross street (The Cross) running more or less at right angles, this opening out to form a triangular open space one end of which provided the entrance to the castle. At the northern end of the town there is another cross street connecting the two parallel main streets, a deeply incised lane on Holt Hill, and from the eastern end of this street Bridge Street runs up to the bridge over the Dee, itself a late medieval structure built of local red sandstone.<sup>271</sup>

The overall layout of Holt is highly regular in form, the main streets and cross streets being set out on straight alignments, defining narrow, long street-blocks, which themselves encompass uniform series of building plots. The plot patterns have an orderly appearance, expressed in the straightness of their boundaries shown on the first edition Ordnance Survey plan of the town. The street-blocks on first impression would seem to differ not in length but in depth. Thus, the block of plots on the west side of Cross Street/Green Street appears to be deeper than the width of the central street-block that lies between the two main streets; while on the east side of Church Street/Bridge Street the plots are much shallower in depth and extend back as far as a field-lane which runs parallel to the main street. This difference in plot depths across the town odd as it spoils the otherwise symmetrical form of the town's plan. However, with the help of field measurements made in the town, combined with careful study of the map evidence, what begins to emerge is a pattern of regularity in plot depths along both sides of the two main streets. For plots fronting along both sides of Church Street/Bridge Street, and for those on the eastern side of Cross Street/Green Street, the distance from the building frontage back to the rear of the plots is around 135 feet (40m).<sup>272</sup> On the western side of Cross Street/Green Street plots extend back to about double this distance, just over 270 feet (80m). The reason why plots on the west side of Cross Street/Green Street extend back twice as far as the others is probably because they were once split by a lane running north-south, mirroring the course of the field lane that ran behind plots on the east side of Church Street/Bridge Street.<sup>273</sup> Indeed this eastern field-lane appears to have had plots fronting it along both sides, placing the parish church within its own plot series (which has subsequently disappeared). Looking at the pattern of plots and streets in Holt overall, then, it appears as though the

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<sup>270</sup> For the church see RCAHMW, *Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Wales and Monmouthshire IV – county of Denbigh* (HMSO, London, 1914), pp.75-6.

<sup>271</sup> On the bridge see Pratt, 'Medieval borough of Holt', pp.42-3; RCAHMW, *Denbigh*, p.76.

<sup>272</sup> Field survey carried out in 2004, see 'Data downloads'.

<sup>273</sup> These former streets (back lanes) are shown on the c.1300 reconstruction map of Holt. Excavations were carried out in 1994 behind a property at the north end of Green Street, on the west side (NGR: SJ41005425). A possible medieval boundary ditch was identified, but on the whole there were no structures of medieval date and only a few 'traces of activity'. D. Thomas, *Green Street, Holt, Clwyd: archaeological evaluation*, Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust report 115 (1994), p.9.

town plan – in terms of its street-blocks – was once more symmetrical in form, with six uniform blocks of plots, each of equal length and depth, and with four rather than three streets running north-south in parallel, the two inner ones being wider than the outer two.

From an analysis of Holt's surviving street and plot patterns it is therefore possible to conjecture the town's original design. The design was based upon parallel streets that run north from a 'base line' formed by the straight alignment of Frog Lane and The Cross. To the south of this line is the castle. The castle and its enclosure appear to have encompassed a larger area than is shown on modern maps, for the courses of both the 'base line' streets and Chapel Street seem to fossilise the outer perimeter of the castle defences, with Castle Street itself – a straight street that seems to bypass Chapel Lane – laid out after the castle's demise and running through its grounds.<sup>274</sup> This encroachment may have been a late-medieval attempt at property development in the town, and pulled the focus southwards to The Cross, the later market place.<sup>275</sup> If this supposition is correct then when Holt was first created it consisted only of the area covered by the parallel street pattern, with the town's market place originally formed by Church Green, opposite the entrance to St Chad's. There is a hint that there was access into this market place from the west, as there is a lane that runs through the plots facing Cross Street/Green Street, about mid-way along this street. This, together with the market place and the church, align on an east-west axis. What we have at Holt, then, is an original design derived using a symmetrical arrangement of straight streets producing regular-sized street-blocks accommodating plots of a consistent depth (and perhaps width too).<sup>276</sup> This very regular arrangement of streets and plots was placed north of the earl's castle, with the church and market place positioned half-way along on the town's horizontal axis, its vertical axis being formed by the straight fence-line running north-south along the rear of plots within the central street-block.

With this interpretation of Holt, the original plan of the town begins to look similar to that at Flint, a 1277 new town situated on the coast to the north of Holt. The similarities in their layout lie in the common use of parallel streets and narrow longitudinal street-blocks. Both plans also lack latitudinal streets, except for those cross streets positioned mid-way and at either end of the town. Like Flint, Holt's plan also extends from the castle gates and takes an overall 'playing-card' shape. While Holt did not have defences it seems they were planned, their likely intended course being along the outer perimeter of the street-blocks.<sup>277</sup> This would have made the circuit the same rectangular shape as that at Flint, and both around 30 acres in total area.<sup>278</sup> Of course, Holt post-dates Flint by about five years, if not more, and from a design point of view the churches in each are located in different positions in the towns. Nevertheless the design similarities between the two towns appear to outweigh the differences, and so it is conceivable that both were designed by the same individual. Considering the proximity of Holt and Flint, this individual was presumably someone who was local throughout this period, between 1277 and 1282-3. Considering what little is known of the early history of Holt it will be of no surprise to learn that its designer is nameless. Their anonymity makes the plan of the town all the more interesting for what it reveals. At a guess, then, we might suggest it was the work of one of the king's clerks working in this area at the time, an administrator such as William of Perton or Nicholas Bonel. This line of reasoning also has implications for identifying who designed

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<sup>274</sup> Little is known of the castle's medieval features. See RCAHMS, Denbigh, pp.74-5.

<sup>275</sup> On suggestions for the town's market places see Pratt, 'Medieval borough of Holt', pp. 35, 38.

<sup>276</sup> The original plot sizes is 'not prescribed anywhere in the medieval records', according to Pratt, 'Medieval borough of Holt', p.45. See also Palmer, 'Town of Holt', p.14, note 1.

<sup>277</sup> See Pratt, 'Medieval borough of Holt', p.53; Palmer, 'Town of Holt', pp.14-15

<sup>278</sup> See Flint.

Flint. Either way, the similarities evident in the two layouts of the towns is a further hint that Holt might legitimately be regarded as an 'Edwardian' new town, even though it was not itself a royal foundation.