

HOLT

- Early history of the town

The origins of the new town of Holt are somewhat obscure. It lies closest to England of all Edward's new towns of Wales, just across the river Dee, within one of its many meanders. It is questionable whether or not Holt should really be included in this survey of Edwardian new towns, since neither it nor the castle were in the king's hands but belonged to John de Warenne, earl of Surrey, who was given lands in Bromfield and Yal in October 1282 as 'a recompense for service rendered in war'.²⁵⁶ In this regard it appears to be similar to the new towns of Ruthin and Denbigh (in the same county) that were created alongside the seigneurial castles of Reginald de Grey and Henry de Lacy (respectively) at around the same time.²⁵⁷ However, two pieces of circumstantial evidence suggest there may have been some early royal influence at Holt. The first concerns the castle, begun in 1282 but first documented as late as 1315,²⁵⁸ which Arnold Taylor suggests 'would have had the king's full cognisance', perhaps with 'the services of the master of the king's works'.²⁵⁹ The second concerns the town's origins. Although the town's original borough charter does not survive, a royal confirmation of 1563 refers to an earlier one of 1285, granted by Warenne.²⁶⁰ Prior to this, in November 1282, Roger Lestrangle had written to the king advising him 'to tell Earl Warenne to keep watch at Brumpfeld [Bromfield], for much supplies enter the land without anyone's knowledge'.²⁶¹ This is an indication that Edward had his eye on the place before Holt was founded, perhaps even having in mind the idea of controlling the river crossing there by using a castle and town to block supplies getting through to the Welsh. Warenne's castle and town ultimately served this purpose, but while it is clear that Holt is not a royal foundation, as were say Rhuddlan or Flint, it was more than simply the product of Warenne's thinking. For this reason it is included here as one of Edward's new towns, others can debate the appropriateness of this.

Holt is recorded early on in the fourteenth century as Castle Lyon (*Castrum Leonis*).²⁶² Its position on the Dee was evidently chosen deliberately and carefully, as Lestrangle's letter makes clear. The 1411 copy of the borough charter shows that the town's market was held

²⁵⁶ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.42; see also A.N. Palmer, 'The town of Holt', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 6 (1907), p.9; L.A.S. Butler, 'Holt Castle: John de Warenne and Chastellion', in J.R. Kenyon and R. Avent (eds.), *Castles in Wales and the Marches: essays in honour of D.J. Cathcart King* (University Press, Cardiff, 1987), pp.105-24.

²⁵⁷ See Denbigh and Ruthin; also Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.35-7, 41-2; Beresford, *New Towns*, pp.547-49.

²⁵⁸ D. Pratt, 'The medieval borough of Holt', *Denbighshire Historical Society Transactions* 14 (1965), p.13.

²⁵⁹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.43. As at Denbigh and Ruthin.

²⁶⁰ Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.144, citing D. Pratt, 'The 1563 charter of Holt', *Transactions of the Denbighshire Historical Society* 23 (1974), pp.104-25. 1563 is the date of the inspeximus, 1411 is the date of the borough charter, itself confirming the earlier grant: Palmer, 'Town of Holt', pp.13-16, 26-31; Pratt, 'Medieval borough of Holt', pp.20-1. See also P.H.W. Booth, 'The corporation of Holt, the manor of Farndon, and the bridge over the Dee, Denbighshire', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 146 (2000 for 1997), pp.109-16.

²⁶¹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.43, note 1 citing *Calendar of Ancient Correspondence Wales*, ed. Goronwy Edwards, p.84.

²⁶² *Calendar of Ancient Petitions*, ed. Rees, p.293, in a document dated 1318-26; see also Beresford, *New Towns*, p.548. Holt means 'wood', and 'must have been partially cleared at the laying out of the town': Palmer, 'Town of Holt', p.15, note 2.

on Fridays, and its burgages rented at one shilling a year.²⁶³ The town soon became quite large. In 1315 152 burgesses were living there, and out of a total of just over 200 burgages, the majority (107) of burgesses held one burgage each.²⁶⁴ At this date this makes Holt's burgess population larger than Conwy, Caernarfon and Aberystwyth, three prominent Edwardian towns, and closer in size to the nearby Denbighshire new towns of the earls, in particular Denbigh.²⁶⁵ The burgesses living in Holt at this time originated mainly from the north-west of England, particularly Cheshire, but others arrived from further afield, from southern and eastern parts of England.²⁶⁶ The town seems to have been set up to be quite an important place. There was a port on the Dee 'next to the bridge there for smacks and boats coming with merchandise from Chester', while the bridge itself was built by the end of the fourteenth century to replace a ferry that was operating in 1315.²⁶⁷ It seems, too, that the town was intended to have been defended. The 1391 survey of the town records how 'in the time of war each burgess or his heirs or assigns shall find for the burgage one garrison man at their own cost for guarding and warding the lord's castle there until the said town be enclosed with a wall of lime and stone'.²⁶⁸ No defences are known to have been built for the town. By the mid-sixteenth century falling market tolls show that the town was in decline, although in the next century its fortunes may have recovered slightly.²⁶⁹

²⁶³ Palmer, 'Town of Holt', p.14. However, an extent of the town made in 1391 records markets 'on Tuesdays, Sundays, and on other days yearly', and it has been suggested that Church Green, The Cross and Smithfield Green were sites for markets in the medieval town: Pratt, 'Medieval borough of Holt', pp.38, 55.

²⁶⁴ Pratt, 'Medieval borough of Holt', p.46.

²⁶⁵ See D.H. Owen, 'Denbigh', and R.I. Jack, 'Ruthin', in R.A. Griffiths (ed.), *Boroughs of Mediaeval Wales* (University of Cardiff, Cardiff, 1978), pp.165-87, 245-61. At Denbigh, in 1305, 52 burgages were held in the town within the walls and 183 outside (Owen, 'Denbigh', p.182), while at Ruthin in 1324 'there were almost exactly 100 burgages held by seventy-one different people' (Jack, 'Ruthin', p.247).

²⁶⁶ Pratt, 'Medieval borough of Holt', p.23. A cross-section of the burgesses' occupations in 1315 is also provided by their surnames, which include tailors, clerks, smiths, and carpenters, as well as a birdkeeper, falconer, gardener, forester and herdsman (p.40).

²⁶⁷ Pratt, 'Medieval borough of Holt', pp.42-3, 56, citing the survey of 1391. Pratt also notes that the bridge had a gate tower on it (p.43).

²⁶⁸ Pratt, 'Medieval borough of Holt', p.53. See also, Palmer, 'Town of Holt', pp.14-15, citing the borough charter.

²⁶⁹ Pratt, 'Medieval borough of Holt', p.34; Soulsby, *Medieval Towns of Wales*, p.147.