

NEWBOROUGH

- Early history of the town

Of all Edward's new towns of north Wales, Newborough on Anglesey is an anomalous case. It was founded not in an attempt to attract English settlers to Wales but as a town for those inhabitants who were forced to move from Llanfaes to make way for the king's new town of Beaumaris, founded in 1296. Rhosyr, the place that became the 'new borough', was already occupied by a royal court (*llys*) belonging to the princes of Gwynedd, the site of which was excavated by archaeologists in the 1990s.²⁸⁰ The court buildings were enclosed by a perimeter wall and included a timber-built hall, the whole complex dating from the early-thirteenth century when it functioned as an administrative centre for this south-west part of the island of Anglesey.²⁸¹ Edward visited Rhosyr in 1283 and was on the island in August of that year when he also visited the site which was to become Beaumaris.²⁸²

Beaumaris was chartered in 1296, but the inhabitants of Newborough did not receive their borough charter until 1303.²⁸³ Between these two dates the burgesses of Llanfaes were moved out and their new borough created. Some thirty burgesses were reluctant to make the move to the new town – which considering the better geographical position of Llanfaes is perhaps not surprising – and were fined for holding out there.²⁸⁴ Meanwhile their houses were being pulled down and the materials used to make new buildings in Beaumaris.²⁸⁵ The new site created for them at Rhosyr was the same in value and extent as the burgesses had at Llanfaes, and at sometime before 1302 90½ acres of land 'were appropriated at a stroke to the use of the borough', to make the new town.²⁸⁶ A little later, this situation is explained in the Pipe Rolls of 1306-7: 'just over 90 acres of demesne have been assigned to certain Welshmen in compensation for the burgages they used to hold in Llanfaes [for] the inhabitants of that town have been moved by the king to Newborough and their lands assigned to Beaumaris castle'.²⁸⁷ The chosen location for the 'new borough', the site of the *llys* at Rhosyr, with its significance as an established Welsh administrative centre, was perhaps seen by the former burgesses of Llanfaes as the best option available under the circumstances. The charter issued by the king in spring 1303 conferred on the burgesses the same privileges enjoyed by the borough of Rhuddlan, an Edwardian foundation of 1277 and a rather ironic choice since it was very much an English town.²⁸⁸ Before Newborough was formed there was, however, a market and fair already operating at Rhosyr, perhaps another reason why the place was chosen for the burgesses of Llanfaes.²⁸⁹ The presence of existing inhabitants at Rhosyr did cause some problems for the folk arriving from Llanfaes, and in 1305 'with diplomatic foresight worthy of larger municipalities, the burgesses of Newborough petitioned Prince Edward of Caernarfon to remove the villain tenants then

²⁸⁰ N. Johnstone, 'Cae Llys, Rhosyr: a court of the Princes of Gwynedd', *Studia Celtica* 33 (1999), pp.251-95.

²⁸¹ Johnstone, 'Cae Llys', pp.251, 254-69.

²⁸² Johnstone, 'Cae Llys', p.251, citing A.D. Carr, *Medieval Anglesey* (Anglesey Antiquarian Society, Llangefni, 1982), p.55; CPR 1281-92, pp.71-2; Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.103.

²⁸³ See Beaumaris; the Newborough charter is printed in Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.283.

²⁸⁴ Beresford, *New Towns*, pp.49-50, citing PRO: E 101/109/2.

²⁸⁵ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.49; Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.110-111.

²⁸⁶ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.52.

²⁸⁷ Beresford, *New Towns*, p.535, citing PRO: E 372/176.

²⁸⁸ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.283; cf. CPR 1321-24, p.407; *Calendar of Ancient Petitions*, ed. Rees, p.26.

²⁸⁹ Beresford, *New Towns*, p.535, citing PRO: E 352/94 m. 22d.

dwelling in their midst, so that their burgages might be surrounded by certain metes and bounds'.²⁹⁰

In 1304-5, shortly after its foundation, the 'new borough' appears in the account roll of the Chamberlain of the Principality of North Wales, returning £8 8s 6d a year in rents.²⁹¹ Market tolls amounted to 59s 3d, and the market was held every Tuesday.²⁹² The accounts also record expenditure on a new mill there.²⁹³ A later survey, of 1352, records a total of 58 holders of *placeae* (plots) in Newborough, predominantly with Welsh surnames, and reveals that not only were some of these individuals holding more than one plot each, they were also paying different amounts in rent, suggesting that their plots were different in size too.²⁹⁴ Three year's prior to the survey, the burgesses were granted the right to elect their own mayor, though it was 'stipulated that the mayor had to be an Englishman'.²⁹⁵ The burgesses were also beginning to feel the effects of their more exposed position in this south-western part of the island. In 1331, 'on the feast of St Nicholas, one hundred and eighty-six acres [about a third of the land around the borough] were so entirely destroyed by the sea and overrun by sand that they were useless for further cultivation', losing the burgesses £4 11s 6d a year in revenue.²⁹⁶ Much later, in 1561, an order was made to forbid 'pulling up of *mor-hesg* (marram grass)' to 'stave off further encroachment' by the sand.²⁹⁷ Edward Lewis claims that 'the borough seemed to have reached the heyday of its prosperity during the fourteenth century'.²⁹⁸ In the sixteenth century the town still seemed to be doing quite well, having 93 houses in c.1547, and in 1507 Henry VII had moved the county courts there from Beaumaris, though 'this had to be reversed in 1549 when it was said that the town had become impoverished and was no longer capable of supporting its pre-eminence in the shire'.²⁹⁹ It seems that despite Newborough's inherently Welsh character and history it was, right from the start, a place that saw interference by the English crown.

²⁹⁰ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.52.

²⁹¹ Lewis, 'Account roll', pp.261-2.

²⁹² Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.208; cf. Lewis, 'Account roll of the Chamberlain', pp.262.

²⁹³ Lewis, 'Account roll of the Chamberlain', pp.262, 269.

²⁹⁴ A.D. Carr, 'The extent of Anglesey', *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society and Field Club* (1971-72), pp.262-72.

²⁹⁵ Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, pp.194, 196. In the English Edwardian castle-towns the role of mayor was performed by the castle constable.

²⁹⁶ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.53, citing an Inquisition Post Mortem of 1333.

²⁹⁷ Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.195.

²⁹⁸ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.208.

²⁹⁹ Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.195.