

OVERTON

- Design and plan of the town

The layout of Overton has a curiously complex arrangement of streets. By and large the streets all have quite straight alignments and intersect at right angles, giving the plan an overall regular appearance. But the streets do not form a grid.³²⁸ Instead there is one main street that enters the town from the west then proceeds to zig-zag, first south, then east, then south again. One stretch of this, High Street, is broadened, no doubt accommodating the town's market, and to the east is the church of St Mary, which in 1284 Queen Eleanor 'had commissioned the making of glass windows for'.³²⁹ The church is situated in a street-block bounded on its eastern side by a street set out in parallel to High Street, the alignment of which is continued by town's main street as it exists to the south. The core of the town plan is therefore arranged on a parallel street-system, the northern end of which tapers to a point (Turning Street). West of this is another street-block extending from the High Street and bounded by Wrexham Road, the main road coming from the west, and Willow Street. The depth of this street-block (260 feet/80m) is about the same as the one containing the church between High Street and School Lane, again revealing a degree of regularity in the town plan.³³⁰ However, it is odd though that Willow Street does not line up with Dark Lane on the opposite side of High Street.³³¹ If it did then Overton's plan would look more like a grid. Another odd mis-alignment is evident at the southern end of High Street, where the road swings on a ninety-degree turn to the east (Pen-y-Llan Street). Here a small lane runs off to the south, but instead of lining up with High Street it diverges off in a dog-leg, and then takes a southerly direction running in parallel to Salop Road. With its funnel-shaped entrance (at the south end of the lane) it looks as if this route was once used as an entrance into the town made to help drive animals into the High Street market place from surrounding pasture land.

So while the plan of Overton's streets look as if they were carefully set out on straight alignments, the streets themselves do not come together neatly or create an overall grid. One reason why the town's streets have this curious arrangement could be to do with Overton's origins, first as a market settlement, then as a chartered borough, the two parts perhaps being physically separated. Alternatively, perhaps the original town plan has been denuded over time, affected by attacks by the Welsh and urban decline during the later middle ages? Certainly the southern end of High Street appears to have few plots by the time of the Tithe Award survey of 1837, in contrast to its northern end. Those plots that are identifiable on nineteenth-century mapping reveal a regular pattern formed by having a common depth, noticeable especially along High Street. These are probably the burgages being allocated by Reginald de Grey in 1293. With their straight boundaries, both at their sides and along the rear, the plots along High Street look as if they were set out to a standard dimension, but if this was the case unfortunately there is no record of what their original dimensions were.

It would seem likely, given their similarly regular forms, that the streets were established along with the plots at the same time, but that the job of allocating the plots as burgages then followed after the borough charter was granted, a task for which Gray was needed. If

³²⁸ Contra Beresford, *New Towns*, p.551.

³²⁹ Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.211, citing PRO: E 101/351/15. Described as 'the queen's chapel at Overton'. For the church see RCAHMS, Flint, pp.111-12.

³³⁰ Based on field survey measurements made in 2004, see 'Data downloads'.

³³¹ Probably 'le Parsones row' recorded in 1361; Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.211-12.

so, the town was probably laid out just prior to when it was chartered as a borough, in 1292, but after the place became Eleanor's, perhaps around 1290. It was at this time that parcels of land were being gifted in Overton, possibly as a consequence of the site for the new town being prepared. With its curious town plan, it is perhaps not surprising that few parallels to Overton can be found in the layouts of Edward's other towns in Wales. The tapering northern end of the High Street has passing resemblance to the eastern end of Water Street at Caerwys, a new town in the same county as Overton, and likewise founded in the 1290s.³³² The depths of the two towns' street-blocks are also similar – could it be that Overton once had a plan that looked more like that at Caerwys?

³³² See Caerwys.