

RHUDDLAN

- Early history of the town

‘King Edward’, remarked Bishop Anian of St Asaph in 1281, ‘has built an important and well-frequented town... and protected it with towers and earthworks’.³³⁴ Rhuddlan was one of three new towns established by Edward’s men in north Wales in 1277. The other two were its close neighbour, Flint, likewise occupying a site on the north coast, and Aberystwyth, located on Cardigan bay on the west coast. All three of these ‘1277 towns’ lay at the edge of the Welsh stronghold of Snowdonia, and were the precursors to those later new towns, of the 1280s, that were positioned much closer to its geographical centre. Rhuddlan’s foundation and early history is comparatively well-documented. It was in fact a new town added to an already existing, earlier town of Norman origin. Norman Rhuddlan was established in the 1080s, soon after the Conquest, by Robert – cousin of Hugh of Avranches, earl of Chester – who had in turn made use of the site of a yet earlier town, an Anglo-Saxon *burh* called Cledemutha, founded in 921.³³⁵ Each of these successive ‘new towns’ occupied the same elevated terrace above the Clwyd river, and stretched along its eastern bank, that is, the English side of the river. Both the Anglo-Saxon and Norman new towns had defensive circuits, the latter also having a castle, a motte, as well as 18 burgesses, a mill, a church and a mint in 1086.³³⁶ The Edwardian town of 1277 was placed adjacent and to the north of the earlier Norman one, and a new castle built between them.

It is clear that while the Edwardian town was being created in 1277-8 there were still inhabitants living in the adjacent Norman town. This is evident from archeological work. Excavation within the eleventh-century defensive circuit shows domestic sites continued to be occupied, and that the Norman church survived until around 1300.³³⁷ This area is likely to be that referred to as ‘old town’ in a later, fifteenth-century survey of Rhuddlan’s burgess properties.³³⁸ Work actually began on Edward’s new town in the summer of 1277. The first recorded activity concerned digging a new and straightened alignment of the Clwyd river to provide easier and safer access between the town and the sea for shipping. This work was possibly being carried out under the direction of Master William of Boston, *fossator*, who was enlisting diggers in Lincolnshire in July.³³⁹ The king himself was at Rhuddlan over a three-month period in the autumn of 1277, from where he visited other works going on at that time, including work at Flint.³⁴⁰ Arnold Taylor suggests this was when work began on the castle, continuing through til 1280 by which time the castle ‘was substantially a finished structure’.³⁴¹ Meanwhile, from August 23 onwards, William of Perton, one of the king’s clerks, was the appointed keeper of works at Rhuddlan (as well as Flint).³⁴² Before the king left Rhuddlan, another clerk, Nicholas Bonel, was made ‘surveyor of his works...

³³⁴ Cited in A.J. Taylor, ‘Rhuddlan cathedral: a ‘might-have-been’ of Flintshire history’, Flintshire Historical Society Publications 15 (1954-5), pp.43-51, at p.45.

³³⁵ Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, pp.226, 228.

³³⁶ Quinell et al, *Excavations*, pp.208-218. Domesday Book records a ‘new borough’ at Rhuddlan, with the customs of Hereford (p.214).

³³⁷ Quinell et al, *Excavations*, pp.223-25.

³³⁸ A. Jones, ‘A fifteenth century document of Rhuddlan’, *Journal of the Flintshire Historical Society* 5 (1915), pp.45-90. The references to ‘old town’ appear on pp.64-5, 71-3, 76-7, 79, 81, 84, 86, 88-9.

³³⁹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.27. This work continued for another three years.

³⁴⁰ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.27, note 6. See also, Tout, *Chapters in Administrative History*, ii, p.45.

³⁴¹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.27-9. Stone was procured for the castle in November 1277. For the castle see RCAHMW, Flint, pp.80-82.

³⁴² Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.19.

both at Le Cheynou [Flint] and at Rothelan'.³⁴³ Perton and Bonel were administrators and were there to act on behalf of the king as local overseers of the works, which included both town and castle. As well as these two clerks, further local co-ordination was provided by a Master Bertram, a military engineer who hailed originally from Gascony in south-west France and who specialised in siege operations.³⁴⁴ In the castle-construction work, Bertram was subsequently joined by Master James of St George, in April 1278.³⁴⁵

By the time Master James of St George was in Rhuddlan in the spring of 1278, work on the new town was seemingly already complete. Earlier, at the start of February, Nicholas Bonel along with the justice of Chester, Guncelin de Batelesmere, and Howel, son of Griffin, were appointed by the king 'to assess his burgages at Rothalan... and to grant and demise at a fixed rent all his lands in those parts'.³⁴⁶ A month later, in mid-March, Guncelin and Master William of Louth, the king's clerk, were appointed 'to commit, assign, and to assess lands and places in Rothelan to all who desire to receive and hold the same from the king, according to their discretion'.³⁴⁷ That burgages were being taken up in Rhuddlan at around this time is indicated in a confirmation of a grant of seven of them to seven men, as well as arable land and 'land in the king's woods there, which they are to uproot and assart', providing 'that they dwell in Rhuddlan'.³⁴⁸ It would appear, then, that by February the town's burgages were ready to be granted out, and so presumably the town was already laid out. This may mean that the ground plan of the streets and plots of the town (and also the adjoining castle) were decided during the autumn period when the king was present, perhaps through the combined thinking of the king's clerks, Perton and Bonel, with the help of Master Bertram. Bonel was the 'king's receiver' in Rhuddlan in 1278, and Howel was bailiff.³⁴⁹ By the autumn of 1278 the town had a 'charter of liberties' granted by the king. This was issued in November and the terms of it were the same as those set out in the charter for Builth that was granted on the same day, both being based upon the customs of Hereford.³⁵⁰ In this regard, Rhuddlan's charter was similar to others issued by Edward in Wales, while also preserving the privileges enjoyed by the earlier Norman town.

Through 1278 and 1279 development of the town continued together with the castle and new river alignment. In September 1278, the king granted a Thomas Kyng permission to extend his burgage, as was the 'late wife of William de Penyton', Margaret.³⁵¹ This and the seven burgages granted earlier in February indicates that people were arriving to take up properties in the town even before the charter of liberties was granted. Two of these new arrivals were named Richard le Waleys – 'the Welsh' – and Richard le Engleys – 'the English'.³⁵² In March 1279, the parson of Rhuddlan church, Master Bernard, informed the king that his men occupied some of the church's land that was being used to enlarge the site 'upon which the king's castle of Rothelan is founded' and 'in order to build burgages near the castle'.³⁵³ The land referred to was presumably that associated with the Norman

³⁴³ CWR, p.160.

³⁴⁴ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.28, 126-7.

³⁴⁵ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.28-9. Masters James and Bertram are referred to in expenditure accounts as engineers, but only James of St George is also described as 'mason'.

³⁴⁶ CWR, p.165.

³⁴⁷ CPR 1272-81, p.366.

³⁴⁸ CPR 1272-81, p.259.

³⁴⁹ CWR, pp.169, 164. Bonel was also vicar of Oswestry in 1281 (CWR, p.202).

³⁵⁰ CChR 1257-1300, p.209.

³⁵¹ CWR, p.168.

³⁵² CPR 1272-81, p.259.

³⁵³ CWR, p.180. A William of Coventry is recorded as a burgess in November 1281 (CWR, p.201).

church which lay just to the south-east of Edward's new castle.³⁵⁴ Then, in July, two years after work had first started at Rhuddlan, the king ordered a survey of the town to take place and sent Master William of Louth, his clerk, 'to view the void plots of land (*placeas*) and other plots in that town, and to assess and rent burgages in the same plots and to demise the burgages at the king's will'.³⁵⁵ Some plots were clearly taken up by then, while some were yet to be occupied. Those that had been granted needed to be assessed. In this regard, William of Perton and Master James, 'keepers of the king's works at Rothelan', as well as the townspeople living there, were instructed to aid Master William in his task.³⁵⁶

Building on the town's burgages continued. In November 1280 we hear that the 'men of Rothelan', the burgesses, 'are now building the town and are expending and will expend great costs about making the town, building it and improving it', as they had promised the king they would do.³⁵⁷ Earlier in the same year, in January, the king had requested that William of Perton and Master James were to oversee the granting of surrounding cleared woodland to those 'having houses in the town', and to this end they were also to 'make a book in which shall be contained such sales, deliveries, grants and feoffments and forms, which shall always be preserved as a record in the castle', no doubt intended to provide evidence in any future disputes between the town's burgesses.³⁵⁸ Through 1279 and 1280 the new town and its growing population was thus subjected to a series of visitations, inspections and surveys by royal administrators, and a close eye kept on how things were progressing. Some insight on the activities of the early immigrant burgesses is provided by a lengthy judicial report of November 1282 on the customs and laws the Welsh ought to be ruled by.³⁵⁹ Burgesses of Rhuddlan were asked by the enquiry about the borough's customs. One, John de Pelham, said 'that he heard from the account of the burgesses of Rhuddlan that the present king granted to them the same liberties as burgesses of Hereford have', but that 'he rarely went to the court of Rhuddlan because he is a merchant and has lately come to the town... and is much away from the town for the purposes of trade'.³⁶⁰ Another burgess, William Wirvyn, described himself as a 'newcomer' and said to the enquiry that 'he has come lately to Wales and has dwelt for a short time only at Rhuddlan'.³⁶¹ It seems therefore that newly arriving burgesses became aware of the town's customs by word of mouth, and that their business activities sometimes required them to spend time away from their homes in the town.

As well as developing burgages during these first few years, there was work to do on the town's defences. While examining burgages and plots of land in his survey of July 1279, Master William of Louth was also asked to look at the town ditch 'about that town and the king's port there'.³⁶² The 'great costs about making the town' being expended by the burgesses, referred to in November 1280, most likely included work on the town's ditch.³⁶³ There was also royal expenditure. In the period between March 1279 and November 1280, £418 was spent on the wages of diggers working in the town, most likely on its defences;³⁶⁴

³⁵⁴ For the church see Quinnell et al, *Excavations*, pp.72-83.

³⁵⁵ CWR, p.178.

³⁵⁶ CWR, p.178.

³⁵⁷ CWR, p.188.

³⁵⁸ CWR, pp.182-3.

³⁵⁹ CWR, pp.190-210.

³⁶⁰ CWR, p.201.

³⁶¹ CWR, p.201.

³⁶² CWR, p.178.

³⁶³ CWR, p.188.

³⁶⁴ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.29.

while out of the £251 spent on the town as a whole between 1280 and 1282, £120 went on paying the wages of diggers working on the town's defences, with £61 on carpenters.³⁶⁵ Carts were required to move earth and timber and in 1279-80 cartage costs for the town works amounted to £120.³⁶⁶ Later on, timber was being procured to make a palisade to supplement the ditch. In July 1282, for example, carts were carrying timber from Delamere forest in Cheshire to Rhuddlan 'in order to enclose that town and to make dwellings there'.³⁶⁷ Also in July, Stephen of Howden, a royal clerk in Chester, supervised acquiring timber 'for the palisade at Rhuddlan', which arrived there by water in August and twenty carts took it up from the riverside into the town.³⁶⁸ Then a watchman was appointed to guard it, being paid 2½d a day to do so.³⁶⁹ The following year, however, the palisade was taken from Rhuddlan and shipped up the coast to Caernarfon and used instead 'for the construction of the castle and town there'.³⁷⁰ So in the end Rhuddlan may have had little more than ditched defences, and even then this may have been an incomplete circuit for archaeological work in the town has so far identified only a section of double-bank and ditch that still survives as earthworks north of the town.³⁷¹ March 1282 saw Welsh forces attack Rhuddlan, and no doubt the partial defences did not help the town's plight.³⁷²

During 1282 and into 1283, the second Welsh war, Edward based himself at Rhuddlan.³⁷³ By then £9500 had been spent on the castle, while further outlay was needed on the town's bridge and king's mills after the Welsh attack, probably to repair them.³⁷⁴ The effects of the war on the town may also have prompted a letter sent by the burgesses to the king. In it they complained that 'though the men of the town loyally undertook the repair of the roads and the market, they were disturbed by war', and that 'so many Welsh are lodged near the town on the outside that they disturb the profit and the market of the English, and give voice to much treason among them'.³⁷⁵ As an English bastion on the north Welsh coast however, Rhuddlan was soon to be superceded by Conwy and Caernarfon. That Edward had intended great things for Rhuddlan is indicated by the plans he had in 1280-1 to move the cathedral from nearby St Asaph to a new site in the town, providing the ground for it as well as finance.³⁷⁶ He described the site of the town as 'an outstanding one, spacious and very well protected', but papal approval was not forthcoming and the war intervened, and with it the move never took place.³⁷⁷ Flint became the county town, while the episcopal seat stayed at St Asaph. In September 1284, at the same time as the king granted charters to his two newly-established towns of Conwy and Caernarfon, Rhuddlan was also issued with a charter making it a 'free borough', all three charters sharing the same written formula.³⁷⁸ The charter may have been intended to help get Rhuddlan back on its feet, perhaps in response to the burgesses' concerns after the war. St Mary's church was also damaged in

³⁶⁵ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.30, citing PRO: E 372/131, rot. 26.

³⁶⁶ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.29.

³⁶⁷ CWR, p.228.

³⁶⁸ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.31.

³⁶⁹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.31, citing PRO: E 101/3/29.

³⁷⁰ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.31, citing PRO: E 101/353/9.

³⁷¹ Quinell et al, *Excavations*, pp.84-93.

³⁷² Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.30, citing Littere Wallie, ed. Edwards, pp.63, 70.

³⁷³ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.31.

³⁷⁴ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.32.

³⁷⁵ *Calendar of Ancient Petitions*, ed. Rees, p.461. The letter is dated very broadly to 1285-95.

³⁷⁶ Taylor, 'Rhuddlan cathedral', pp.43-51.

³⁷⁷ Taylor, 'Rhuddlan cathedral', p.44; Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.228.

³⁷⁸ CChR 1257-1300, p.277. Flint was also granted a charter even though it was also by then seven year's old.

the attack of 1282,³⁷⁹ and it is possible that this prompted its move from the Norman town to the new one of Edward's, perhaps even to the site that had been intended for the cathedral. Certainly little was left standing of the Norman church after its demolition, for re-usable building materials were deliberately removed.³⁸⁰ Ten years after the Welsh attack, 75 taxpayers are recorded in the town.³⁸¹ By 1300, the town had effectively shifted from its Norman site to the new Edwardian one. To mark this move there may even have been some ceremonial infilling of the ditches of the earlier town.³⁸²

The early history of Rhuddlan is one of the better documented of Edward's new towns. Through the period of 1277-1282 emerges a picture of a town coming into being, a scene of much activity on the part of the king's men, as well as burgesses taking up residence there. Through royal surveys and letters, the level of bureaucracy involved is evident too, and of course it is thanks to this administrative burden that the town's story is known. It was certainly a place favoured by the king, at least early on, as revealed in his aspirations for it, and also in choosing Rhuddlan as his headquarters both in 1277 and in 1282-3. It seems that the men instrumental earliest on in making the town were William of Perton and Nicholas Bonel, the king's clerks, but there was also the contribution made by others, including William of Louth, Guncelin de Batelesmere, Howel, son of Griffin, and Masters James, Bertram and William of Boston, as well as the king himself. What is clear is that the town was created at the same time as the castle was being built, the river straightened, the defences made, and that burgesses were soon arriving, perhaps only a few months after the town was established, and only subsequently did the place then become legally a borough, an enfranchised town. This documented process of urban development of Rhuddlan provides a useful framework through which to interpret the town's plan and design.

³⁷⁹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.30.

³⁸⁰ Quinnell et al, *Excavations*, pp.82, 223. The new church was there by 1323: *Flintshire Ministers' Accounts, 1301-1328*, ed. Jones, p.xliv.

³⁸¹ Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.229, citing PRO: E 179/242/52.

³⁸² Quinnell et al, *Excavations*, pp.38, 220.