

WINCHELSEA

- Early history of the town

Winchelsea, Maurice Beresford notes, 'has deservedly received much attention from students of medieval town planning'.⁴⁰⁵ The reason for this attention is to do with the very detailed records (for the time) that survive of the town's foundation, and also the well-preserved physical remains of its grid-plan layout occupying a hill-top in this pretty corner of east Sussex.⁴⁰⁶ Its origin is different, too, from the Edwardian new towns of north Wales. Rather than being the outcome of Edward's warring with the Welsh, New Winchelsea's origins lie in the demands voiced by inhabitants of Old Winchelsea, whose long-established port was being threatened by flooding from the sea.⁴⁰⁷ This relocation of the town required royal intervention and approval, and hence it is well-documented by Edward's bureaucrats.

The first sign that Winchelsea's inhabitants were concerned about the threat of flooding comes in the reign of Edward's father, during the mid-thirteenth century. In 1249 they were instructed to be 'diligent in repairing and preserving the town against the sea', but in the following year a storm 'overwhelmed more than 300 houses and certain churches', and then yet another, in 1252, recorded by Matthew Paris: 'at Winchelsea, a port most valuable to the English and especially to Londoners, the sea, bursting through the sea walls, invaded mills and houses and swept away many drowned men'.⁴⁰⁸ Subsequently, in the 1270s, further difficulties were experienced. In autumn 1271 the quay and 'a great part' of the church of St Thomas were 'washed away by the floods and tempests of the sea', and a call made for the 'speedy provision... for the repair of the said quay'.⁴⁰⁹ Five years later, in 1276, Matthew de Horne – one of Winchelsea's more senior 'barons' – was granted a plot of land measuring 100 by 50 feet 'so that the said Matthew may make a quay upon the said place for the defence of his house against inundation of the sea and build upon it'.⁴¹⁰ The townspeople were losing the battle and their sense of urgency is clear. Not only that, the revenues accruing from the town were falling, too, as Maurice Beresford points out, with a drop from around £80 in the 1260s to about half this in 1278.⁴¹¹ It was in this context that

⁴⁰⁵ M.W. Beresford and J.K.S. St Joseph, *Medieval England: an aerial survey* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1958), p.221.

⁴⁰⁶ For example: R. Unwin, *Town Planning in Practice – an introduction to the art of designing cities and suburbs* (Fisher Unwin, London, 1909); T.H. Hughes and E.A.G. Lamborn, *Town Planning: Ancient and Modern*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1923); Tout, *Mediaeval Town Planning*, pp.23-6; C.E. Chambers, 'The French bastides and the town plan of Winchelsea', *Archaeological Journal* 94 (1938), pp.177-206; W. Maclean Homan, 'The founding of New Winchelsea', *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 88 (1949), pp.22-41; Beresford, *New Towns*, pp.14-27; D. Martin and B. Martin, *Quarter-by-Quarter Analysis of Winchelsea, East Sussex* (Archaeology South-East, unpublished report, University College London, 2002); D. Martin and B. Martin, *An Extensive Urban Survey Assessment of Winchelsea, east Sussex* (Archaeology South-East, unpublished report, University College London, 2002); D. Martin and B. Martin, *New Winchelsea, Sussex. A medieval port town* (Heritage Marketing, Kings Lynn, 2004); D. Martin and D. Rudling (eds.), *Excavations in Winchelsea, Sussex 1974-2000* (Heritage Marketing, Kings Lynn, 2004).

⁴⁰⁷ On 'old' Winchelsea see *Victoria History of the Counties of England, Sussex*, volume 9, the *Rape of Hastings*, ed. L.F. Salzman (Oxford University Press, London, 1937), pp.62-3, 67; Martin and Martin, *Extensive Urban Survey*, pp.4-5.

⁴⁰⁸ CPR 1247-58, p.39; *Victoria History, Sussex*, 9, p.63, citing Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora* (1247-50).

⁴⁰⁹ CChR 1257-1300, p.177.

⁴¹⁰ CPR 1272-81, p.151. Cf. CPR 1281-92, pp.16, 62.

⁴¹¹ Beresford, *New Towns*, p.19.

provision for a new town of Winchelsea was being made. This began in autumn 1280. With 'the old town being for the most part submerged by the sea', the king's steward, Ralph de Sandwich, was given a commission 'to extend or buy or obtain certain lands... which are suitable for the new town of Winchelsea'.⁴¹² The town was 'to be built upon a hill called Yhamme [Iham]', a higher, drier site where the threat of coastal flooding was out of the question.⁴¹³ The process by which New Winchelsea was set out upon this hill is revealed by a remarkably detailed sequence of records.

New Winchelsea was established by a process of negotiation, between the king's agents, the 'barons' (burgesses) of Old Winchelsea, and the holders of lands earmarked for the new town. This all took place between November 1280 and June 1288, a period of nearly eight years. The protracted nature of creating the new town is of note. Presumably it was made complicated by settling local landholding agreements and dealing with the needs of the barons. It contrasts sharply with the new towns established in north Wales, which were by and large up and running within a year or two at the most. The 'certain lands' that Sandwich was negotiating over in November 1280 included arable, coppice, buildings, gardens and courtyards in the manor of Iham which had belonged to John Tregoz, and which he had then passed to his daughter and her husband, William de Grandison, prior to the Crown acquiring them in 1284.⁴¹⁴ There were also buildings and lands belonging to others, including the Abbot of Battle and the abbey of Fécamp in Normandy which held the church of St Leonard as well as the 'little town of Iham' which already existed on the hill-top.⁴¹⁵ All these landholdings demanded careful negotiation before the new town could be set out on the site, a process that lasted into the following year.

A year after Ralph de Sandwich's commission, and presumably in response to his findings, a further stage in negotiations took place. This was initiated in November 1281 when Stephen de Penecestre, Iter d'Angouleme and Henry le Waleys were appointed by the king 'to assess certain places at Ihamme, and to let them to the barons and goodmen of Winchelsea for building; saving to the immediate lords of the aforesaid plots a reasonable extent of every acre'.⁴¹⁶ Here we see these three agents at work assessing the land where the new town was to be set out, and thinking about how it should be transferred. The three men involved in this were all experienced administrators of urban affairs. Penecestre was warden of the Cinque Ports at the time (of which Winchelsea was one), while Angouleme audited Irish Exchange accounts in 1283, and had become constable of Bordeaux in 1289-90.⁴¹⁷ Le Waleys, originally from Striguil near Chepstow in the Welsh borders, was himself twice mayor of London (1273-74, 1281-84) and had served as mayor of Bordeaux in 1275.⁴¹⁸ The process was not finished however. Two years later again, in March 1283, two of these three – Stephen de Penecestre and Henry le Waleys – were joined by John de Cobeham, 'a

⁴¹² CPR 1272-81, p.414.

⁴¹³ CPR 1272-81, p.414.

⁴¹⁴ Homan, 'Founding of new Winchelsea', pp.24-5. See also CCLR 1279-88, pp.509-10.

⁴¹⁵ Homan, 'Founding of new Winchelsea', pp.24-5. Homan locates the 'little town of Iham' on the west slopes of the hill (p.26). It was a rural settlement and not a town in the modern sense of the term. Fécamp's holding of lands in this area dated back to before the Norman conquest; Victoria History, Sussex, 9, p.62.

⁴¹⁶ CPR 1281-92, p.3.

⁴¹⁷ See Prestwich, Edward I, p.307; G.A. Williams, *Medieval London. From commune to capital* (Athlone Press, London, 1963), p.330. On The Cinque Ports see Victoria History, Sussex, 9, pp.34-39.

⁴¹⁸ Williams, *Medieval London*, pp.333-35.

baron of the exchequer'.⁴¹⁹ They were instructed 'to assess certain places at Ihamme and to commit the same, at a certain rent according to their lawful extent, to the barons and goodmen of Winchelsea for building and dwelling purposes, saving to the immediate lords a reasonable extent of every acre'.⁴²⁰ Here we seem to have decisions being made again about how much land was required and what its value would be, similar to the letter patent of 1281. Indeed, the shared phrasing of the two letters is striking. Does this suggest some delay had occurred in the process? Perhaps caused by protracted negotiations with landholders and townsfolk? If so, it seems by the autumn the situation was such that it was possible to lay the town out on the chosen site. Meanwhile, the old town was losing yet more revenue so that by 1283 it was just over £26, no doubt adding to the need to get on.⁴²¹

The instruction issued by the king in October 1283 is one of the most explicit contemporary accounts we have in England for the formation of a new town, and it is often cited.⁴²² It records the 'appointment of Stephen de Penecestre, Henry le Waleys and Gregory de Rokesle to plan and assess the new town of Yhamme which the king is ordering to be built there for the barons of the town and port of Winchelsea', and for them 'to plan and give directions for streets and lanes (*vicis et venelis*) necessary for the said new town, for places suitable for a market, and for two churches, one to St Thomas, and the other to St Giles, as there are in the aforesaid town of Winchelsea, to assign and deliver to the said barons competent places according to the requirements of their state, and to provide and give directions concerning harbours and all other things necessary for the town', with a 'grant to the same barons that they be as free in the new town as in the old town of Winchelsea, and have the same free customs according to their charters'.⁴²³ Once again, Penecestre and Waleys are joined by a new man, this time Gregory de Rokesley. Like Waleys, he had been mayor of London – in 1274–81 – and had connections with Gascony through his mercantile activities.⁴²⁴ He was born in Kent and died in 1291, so he not only had local connections and knowledge (like Penecestre) but was also quite aged by the time he was appointed by the king to work at Winchelsea.⁴²⁵ What they were doing is seemingly clear: 'to plan and give directions' for the town's streets, markets and churches, as well as plots for the barons to take up. It would appear that these three men were responsible for arranging the layout of new Winchelsea. Given their backgrounds though, as weighty merchants and civic dignitaries, are we to imagine that they had both the expertise and experience needed to devise the design for the town, and to lay it out on the ground? Or is it more likely that they were there simply overseeing such matters, instructing others on-site who had more technical knowledge and practical experience than they?

It seems that the efforts that were being made in 1283 to have New Winchelsea established did not fulfill all the requirements for the new town. Three years later on, in February 1286, a mandate was issued to Stephen de Penecestre: 'to lay out lots at fixed rents for dwelling purposes [at] a place called 'le Kenel' for the enlargement of the new town of Winchelsea'.⁴²⁶ Compared to the letter issued in 1283 this is actually a much more explicit statement about Penecestre's tangible role in physically laying out the town – 'to lay out lots'. Together with

⁴¹⁹ Prestwich, Edward I, p.431.

⁴²⁰ CPR 1281-92, pp.58-9.

⁴²¹ Beresford, New Towns, p.19.

⁴²² For example, Tout, Mediaeval Town Planning, p.24; Homan, 'Founding of new Winchelsea', pp.22-3; Beresford, New Towns, p.19.

⁴²³ CPR 1281-92, pp.81-2.

⁴²⁴ Williams, Medieval London, pp.330-31

⁴²⁵ Williams, Medieval London, pp.330-31.

⁴²⁶ CPR 1281-92, p.225.

his occurrence in all three previous instructions concerning New Winchelsea, issued since November 1281, he was the more influential character in the whole process at the local level. Whereas Angouleme, Cobeham, and Rokesley had come and gone, Penecestre had stayed the course, no doubt because of his position as warden of the Cinque Ports during this time. Of course, Waleys, too, had been an enduring presence between 1281 and 1283, but by 1286 we see Penecestre working alone to enlarge the town. This expansion of the town that he was undertaking at 'le kenel' probably lay towards the south.⁴²⁷ It is also of note that in the same mandate he was asked to make 'a return for registration in the Exchequer of the names of all the inhabitants, their tenures and rents'.⁴²⁸ This shows that by around this time the move by inhabitants to the new town was underway, a move no doubt hastened when 'the great storm of February 1288 completed the ruin of Old Winchelsea'.⁴²⁹ The document that Penecestre drew up presumably formed the basis of the rent-roll which 'was drawn up by the mayor and 24 *jurats* of the town' in 1292 (and which William Homan used as a basis to reconstruct a map of how the town looked at this time).⁴³⁰ It recorded 'the area of each plot and the annual rent due for it to the Crown, as well as the name of the person to whom it was allotted'.⁴³¹ It seems, then, that in the founding of new Winchelsea Stephen de Penecestre's role was a strong and important one.

The new town thus appears to have been established in a series of distinct stages according to the documentary accounts. It started with negotiations over land and property, then proceeded to selecting particular sites within the area of the hill, then laying out the town on the ground – its streets and plots, and spaces for churches and markets – and then, lastly, a survey of the properties within the town. All this took nearly eight years. It was only in 1288 that the new town appears to have finally replaced the old. In June of that year the sheriff of Sussex was informed that 'the king has granted to the barons of Winchelsea, by reason of the wreck that lately came to their town by the tempests of the sea, his site and plot of land of Ihamme... except 10 acres of land that the king retains for his own use, to dwell thereon and make their town of Winchelsea, and to hold at fee farm, so they shall be there as free as they were previously at Winchelsea and shall use and enjoy there the same liberties as they were wont to do at Winchelsea by the charters of the king's progenitors'.⁴³² With this the king made it clear that the new had replaced the old, but that the privileges the inhabitants previously had still remained. In July, John Kirkby, treasurer and 'a driving force behind major improvements in financial administration' in the royal exchequer, was appointed by the king to deliver the land of the new town to the barons of Winchelsea, and 'to appoint on behalf of the king a mayor and twenty-four *jurats* to make the final arrangements for the allocation and transfer of ground to the citizens of the new town'.⁴³³ This act was recorded in the 1292 rental by the town's mayor and *jurats*, preserving for the urban community not only a list of the various properties that made up the new town but also its legal basis.⁴³⁴ The rental also

⁴²⁷ See below, 'Design and plan of the town'.

⁴²⁸ CPR 1281-92, p.225.

⁴²⁹ Victoria History, Sussex, 9, p.63. Thomas Stonham's map of 1599 shows the position of 'owlld winshallse drowned', see Victoria History, Sussex, 9, opposite p.34.

⁴³⁰ Victoria History, Sussex, 9, p.67; Homan, 'Founding of new Winchelsea', pp.28-37, plus map. See also Martin and Martin, Quarter-by-Quarter Analysis.

⁴³¹ Homan, 'Founding of new Winchelsea', p.28. Curiously, Homan did not refer to the mandate issued to Penecestre in 1286.

⁴³² CCLR 1279-88, pp.509-10, also CFR 1272-1300, p.249.

⁴³³ Prestwich, Edward I, p.234; Victoria, History, Sussex, 9, p.67; Homan, 'Founding of new Winchelsea', p.28.

⁴³⁴ VCH Sussex, p.67.

records the size and population of the town in 1292: comprising 802 plots held by 690 persons it was the largest of all the new towns founded in Edward's time.⁴³⁵

By 1288, then, all seems to have been done. Some issues remained, however. In 1303 William de Eschingham and William de Hastynge were appointed by the king to look into a complaint made by William Burgeys and John de Langhurst regarding 'compensation that has never been made for 35 acres of land within the site of the new town'.⁴³⁶ They held the land prior to the town's development, and John Kirkby was meant to have provided them with 'a reasonable exchange'. Subsequently, the king 'appointed Stephen de Penecestre, John de Cobeham and Gregory de Rokesle to make such exchange... including compensation for any loss occasioned thereby, but by reason of the deaths of the bishop and the said commissioners it was not done'.⁴³⁷ These were the three individuals working in the town in 1283. It had taken another twenty years for Burgeys and Langhurst to have their complaint heard, during which time their lands had become the new town. What happened to New Winchelsea after its foundation has been recounted elsewhere.⁴³⁸ Suffice to say that the new town was initially provided with stone-built gates at each of its four main points of entry, was well-endowed with churches and religious institutions, including two friaries and three hospitals, and had a harbour on the river Brede.⁴³⁹ There is some uncertainty over whether the town was encircled by earthwork and palisade defences linking with the four gates, though the line of a ditch on the west side of the town is possibly one such alignment.⁴⁴⁰ Decline soon set in. After the fourteenth-century, and in the face of French attacks, a new set of defences created on a tighter circuit, cutting off the gradually-emptying southern part of the town where rents declined markedly in the 1340s and 1360s.⁴⁴¹ In due course – and with some irony considering the town's move to higher ground – the sea retreated leaving it stranded. Without a seaport the prosperity of this once important member of the Cinque Ports waned.

⁴³⁵ Martin and Martin, *Extensive Urban Survey*, p. 32, citing PRO: SC 11/673.

⁴³⁶ CPR 1301-1307, p.185.

⁴³⁷ CPR 1301-1307, p.185.

⁴³⁸ See Beresford, *New Towns*, pp.27-8; Martin and Martin, *Extensive Urban Survey*, pp.8-12; Martin and Martin, *New Winchelsea*, *passim*.

⁴³⁹ Martin and Martin, *Extensive Urban Survey*, pp.18, 22, 24-31.

⁴⁴⁰ Martin and Martin, *Extensive Urban Survey*, p.22; Martin and Martin, *New Winchelsea*, p.41.

⁴⁴¹ Martin and Martin, *Extensive Urban Survey*, p.22-3, figures 7, 8 and 9; also Martin and Martin, *Quarter-by-Quarter Analysis*, *passim*, has details of the late medieval and post medieval histories of the town and its properties.