Early history of the town

Harlech was one of two new towns founded by Edward I in the county of Merioneth, the other being the now ‘lost’ town of Bere. The commanding site of Harlech overlooks the sweep of Tremadoc Bay, standing opposite and across from Cricieth over on Pen Llŷn. It is as if both towns are standing guard over this southern entrance into the high mountains of Snowdonia, both being positioned at roughly the same distance from the broad natural harbour of Traeth Bach and the river valleys that lead up from the sea there to the Welsh heartland of Gwynedd. Unlike Cricieth however, Harlech was not the site of an earlier Welsh stronghold. Edward’s men began preparatory work on the castle at Harlech in May 1283, with masons dispatched from Conwy in late June, and others again in mid July. Between August 17 and 20 Edward was at Harlech himself, after which the work was under ‘the charge of five squires of the royal household’ – John Cosyn, Ebulo de Montibus, John of Gayton, John de Scaccario and Peter of Cornhill, two of whom were Savoyards, hailing from Savoy as did Master James of St George, the king’s senior architect in north Wales at this time. Arnold Taylor sees Master James’ as ‘ultimately responsible for the works at Harlech’, while Hugh of Leominster was clerk of works at Harlech, as well as at Caernarfon.

By October 1284 the initial works were advancing and the castle received its first constable, replacing the five royal agents who the king had placed in charge there in summer 1283. Soon after this the town was chartered as a ‘free borough’, its customs and privileges being modeled on those of Conwy. Harlech’s charter was issued on the same date as Bere’s and Cricieth’s, November 22, all three boroughs also sharing a geographical proximity as well as a common legal foundation. Work on the castle continued after this, through the late 1280s, the details of which are revealed by royal accounts, the sum of the building work by the time of completion in 1290 being around £9500. By 1294, the castle had twenty-seven soldiers, while residing in the adjoining new town were eleven men, twelve women and twenty-one children. Three of the men had Welsh names. The Lay Subsidy roll for Merioneth (of 1292-3) records 12 taxpayers in Harlech. It was a small town, similar in size to Cricieth. Royal accounts of the early 1300s reveal a total of 24½ rented burgages in 1305 and 29¼ in 1312. The market generated five shillings a year in 1304-5. It was held on Saturdays and the town had two fairs during the year, but the site of the town, there was however a Welsh maenor at Harlech, ‘demolished at the time of the conquest, the houses destroyed, and the mill and lands... arrented to the burgesses’ of the new town. Lewis, Mediaeval Boroughs, pp.53-4.

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236 There was however a Welsh maenor at Harlech, ‘demolished at the time of the conquest, the houses destroyed, and the mill and lands... arrented to the burgesses’ of the new town. Lewis, Mediaeval Boroughs, pp.53-4.
237 Taylor, Welsh Castles, p.65.
238 Taylor, Welsh Castles, p.66, the two Savoyards were John Cosyn abd Ebulo de Montibus. See Taylor, ‘Some notes on the Savoyards’, pp.304-12.
239 Taylor, Welsh Castles, pp.72, 66; see also Taylor, ‘Master James of St George’.
241 CChR 1257-1300, p.280.
242 CChR 1257-1300, p.280.
243 Taylor, Welsh Castles, p.67, plus see pp.68-72.
244 Lewis, Mediaeval Boroughs, p.201.
245 Lewis, Mediaeval Boroughs, p.201.
247 Lewis, Mediaeval Boroughs, pp.54, 66.
situated on a rock’, made things difficult for the inhabitants who in 1329 complained to the king that through their lofty position ‘no material advantage accrued to either the town or the castle inhabitants’, and hence ‘the poor burgesses sought a grant of two additional fairs’ to improve their town’s fortunes.\textsuperscript{249} Worse was to come. Harlech suffered in Glyndŵr’s attack with 46 houses being burned, and along with destroyed goods of the burgesses the town’s loss amounted to £540.\textsuperscript{250}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{249} Lewis, Mediaeval Boroughs, p.201. Lewis also noted the role of Harlech as ‘a port of some note’, with the mayor and bailiffs of the town being ordered by the king in 1324 ‘to arrest all ships of forty tons and upwards in their port for the king’s use’ (p.202).

\textsuperscript{250} Lewis, Mediaeval Boroughs, pp.201-2.}