

## BEAUMARIS

- Design and plan of the town

The layout of Beaumaris is based on two main streets that meet at right-angles to form a T-shape. One of these, Castle Street, runs parallel to the shoreline up to castle gates located at its northern end, while the other, Church Street, is perpendicular to the shoreline and extends uphill past the church of Ss Mary and Nicholas. Both streets are laid out on straight alignments. Beyond these two core streets, the original extent of the new town, as it was laid out, is open to debate. The uncertainty is linked to the question of where the town's medieval defences ran. The accepted view, that defences around the town were built only as late as the fifteenth century, is challenged by the discovery of a ditch alignment to the west of the castle moat.<sup>58</sup> A longer circuit has been postulated already, which would have encompassed a much larger area than that enclosed by the shorter fifteenth-century circuit. Was this larger area the extent of Beaumaris as it was first laid out, or was it an area added later as the town's prosperity grew? This is a question that gets to the heart of how Beaumaris was planned, and what its original layout comprised.

One argument would be to see the area enclosed by the fifteenth-century defences as the earliest part of Beaumaris, with the areas to the outside of it, to the north and west, as suburbs of later origin. The plan of the town provides some evidence against this however. In particular there is an alignment of Little Lane and Chapel Lane which runs parallel to the north of Castle Street and crosses through where the fifteenth century defences ran (along Steeple Lane). This suggests that this was a street alignment *pre-dating* the later town wall, and that the circuit of the latter cut through existing streets and properties. There is documentary support for this, for we know 30 burgages were removed to make way for the new wall in 1414, and it is clear also that this was a new work and not a replacement of an existing fortification.<sup>59</sup> If the streets and plots in this western area of the town were originally included from start they would lie within the postulated thirteenth-century circuit. The curious ninety-degree turn in New Street itself suggests that this road was bounded and constrained by something, following a ditch perhaps? But the name 'new street' is also suggestive that it was a later arrival, which might then be interpreted as a sign that the area to the west of the fifteenth-century wall was indeed a suburb added onto the town's earlier nucleus. So the evidence can be read in two different ways. One further possibility, which might help to resolve this issue, is to see New Street as a new, fourteenth-century addition inserted to help develop this part of the town, but within an area already prescribed by an existing circuit surrounding the town as a whole. Future excavation in the New Street area may help to confirm or refute this view, but there is also another avenue available to explore these ideas, using the town's earliest written records.

The area of the new town occupied by rented burgages at the start of the fourteenth century can of course be estimated by multiplying the number of recorded burgages in 1305 with known dimensions of the town's original burgages. Taking the figure of 132 burgages, the area covered would be 132 x (80 x 40) feet, that is, 132 x 3200 square feet. This equates to 422,400 square feet in all (41,100m<sup>2</sup>). By 1322, when the burgage total had risen to 154, the area covered by rented burgages in the town was 492,800 square feet (45,780m<sup>2</sup>). Using field-survey measurements made in the present-day town as a basis,

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<sup>58</sup> See above, 'Early history of the town'.

<sup>59</sup> Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.111, fn. 3 and 5; R.B. White, undated, untitled typescript report on 15<sup>th</sup>-century town ditch in Steeple Lane (GAT town files).

these areas can be mapped-out and related to the town's plan.<sup>60</sup> However to deduce the entire inhabited area of the town from the 1305 rental the curtilages associated with the burgages also have to be taken into account.<sup>61</sup> The length and breadth dimensions of these were recorded in statute perches (16½ feet). Not all of the burgages had associated curtilages, but many did. For example, Walter of Winchester had three burgages (of 40 by 80 feet) and two curtilages of eight by four, and five by two perches, while Roger Capello had just one burgage.<sup>62</sup> Combining the area of both burgages and curtilages listed in 1305 produces an overall figure of 605,827 square feet (14 acres/56,300m<sup>2</sup>), an area measuring about 780 feet on two sides (238m). This easily encompasses all plots along Castle Street and Church Street (both within the fifteenth-century circuit as well as outside), and those along Rating Row and Steeple Street, but *not* the plots along New Street. That some building-plots on the two main streets date back to the time of the town's foundation is also verified by modern field-measurement, for a width of forty feet is still evident across some property frontages, especially those plots close to the intersection of Castle and Church Streets. Also, excavations in former plots east of Rating Row revealed domestic occupation and industrial activities, together with timber-footed buildings, of late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth century date, showing that this area of the town was likewise occupied right from the start.<sup>63</sup> Indeed these buildings appear to have fronted a now lost road that once ran northwards out of the town towards Llanfaes, and one reference from 1306 to wages paid to a mason and four labourers working to obstruct the 'gate towards the field' may refer to the blocking-up of this route at an early date.<sup>64</sup> So from the calculated built-up area derived from the property rental it appears that New Street was developed after 1305.

Perhaps, then, we should see Beaumaris as having two phases of development? The first including Castle Street and Church Street, the area closest to the castle and the quay, and a second, perhaps coming soon after the first, extending the town further westwards in the area of New Street. It may be that at the outset the whole of the new town was provided with a ditched circuit encompassing not only the earliest development but also the area of New Street. This would then explain why the fifteenth century town wall appears to cut through pre-existing streets and properties. Having provision for urban expansion built into the town's original design is not unknown, and shows foresight on the part of the planners. We have already seen that Edward himself had high expectations for the future prosperity and success of Beaumaris. The tighter circuit of the later, fifteenth-century town wall is probably a reflection of the need to keep building costs down – the donation of £10 to the town by the prince has already been noted – and perhaps also to make use of the church as part of the town's defensive system. In this context, Steeple Street itself probably dates from when the later wall was constructed, providing extra-mural access around the new defences for those properties that now lay outside them, especially since the wall had itself apparently severed access behind Castle Street properties between Little Lane and Chapel Street.

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<sup>60</sup> Measurements based on a field-survey conducted in 2004. See 'Data downloads'.

<sup>61</sup> 'Extent of burgages', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 1 (1877), pp.xiv-xix.

<sup>62</sup> 'Extent of burgages', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 1 (1877), pp.xiv, xvi.

<sup>63</sup> Excavation report: D. Hopewell, 'Beaumaris Health Centre Excavations', *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society and Field Club* (1997), pp.9-36: burgage boundary ditches were identified (p.25).

<sup>64</sup> Arnold, *Welsh Castles*, p.111, though he interprets this as evidence for blocking a gate in the castle defences. By 1300 the cost of construction for the castle works was nearly £11,400.

If this view of the original size and extent of Beaumaris is accepted, the town was designed to cover an area that was equivalent approximately to that of Conwy, founded in 1283-4; but unlike Conwy it did not acquire stone defences until much later. An indication, though, that defences like Conwy's were perhaps envisaged for Beaumaris is the surviving foundations of a substantial stone-built wall connecting with the castle-defences close to the dock that Master James and Walter of Winchester had written to the exchequer about in their letter. We know that money for the castle project ran short after 1300, and that it was never completed,<sup>65</sup> and so it would be no surprise that any initial plan to wall the town would have to be abandoned, leaving only vestigial traces such as the alignment of New Street and the ditch alignment west of the castle. One further suggestion that New Street was part of the original town design is its orientation, since it matches that of both Castle Street and Little Lane/Chapel Street. This shared alignment makes it look as if they were all laid out at the same time. This alignment also matches that of the surviving section of town wall that joined up with the castle defences beside the dock. The evidence at Beaumaris, then, is for a castle and town, closely connected in their layout, seemingly laid out to one overall plan. This places Beaumaris in the same category as other Edwardian towns in north Wales, especially Conwy, a connection that is further indicated by the shared forms of their main streets. The T-shape of Castle Street and Church Street is replicated at Conwy by the same shape as Castle Street and High Street. Both towns have one of their two main streets (the one running up to the castle) placed parallel to the quayside and shoreline, with a second, perpendicular street running at right-angles up from the waterfront. In both cases, too, this perpendicular street actually extends across the line of Castle Street slightly to meet with the water's edge, so the 'T' becomes more of a cross-shape (†). The two towns also share the same oddity in their plans, a curved street, Rating Row in the case of Beaumaris. This particular street seems to be out of keeping compared with the town's other streets with their straight alignments, and it may be that it preserves a trace of some relict, pre-urban landscape feature, one possibility being the boundary of a once much larger oval shaped enclosure, a common feature associated with early Christian monastic sites in western Britain and Ireland.<sup>66</sup> If so it would pre-date the burgesses' new chapel in the town, built in the early 1300s 'because their parish church is at two leagues or more... so that they cannot go there when the weather is tempestuous'.<sup>67</sup>

The similarities between the layout of Conwy and Beaumaris are curious, not least because the two towns are separated by a period of more than ten years. However, since the two towns shared the same wording in their respective charters, it is a similarity that should not be too surprising. Then there is the involvement in both places of Master James of St George. He had been responsible for the construction of the castle and town-defences at Conwy in the mid-1280s, and it was he who Edward had placed in charge of building works at Beaumaris a decade later.<sup>68</sup> The shared town plans may therefore be a signature of Master James' involvement, not only in orchestrating the two castle-building projects, but also in the design and planning of the two new towns. It is of note that of Edward's new towns in north Wales, only these two had this shared design, and both were places that saw the king's master mason involved right from the start of the work. In this regard,

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<sup>65</sup> Arnold, *Welsh Castles*, pp.110-114; RCAHMS, Anglesey, pp.8-13.

<sup>66</sup> See L. Swan, 'Monastic proto-towns in early medieval Ireland: the evidence of aerial photography, plan analysis and survey', in H.B. Clarke and A. Simms (eds) *The Comparative History of Urban Origins in Non-Roman Europe*, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 255 (1985), ii, pp.77-102.

<sup>67</sup> *Calendar of Ancient Petitions*, ed. Rees, p.471. Letter from the burgesses to the king and council, dated 1305 or 1314-15.

<sup>68</sup> Arnold, *Welsh Castles*, pp.45-55, 104-111; see also 'Conwy'.

Beaumaris might be one of the rare cases in medieval urban planning where we are able, with a small degree of confidence, to pinpoint the author of a town plan. Moreover, with its precisely laid-out plots and set-square streets, the same geometrical thinking that lay behind the plan of the town underpinned the architect's perfect 'symmetry of design' for the castle.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Arnold, *Welsh Castles*, p.114.