

BEAUMARIS

- Early history of the town

Beaumaris was the last of Edward's castle-towns to be built in north Wales. Facing across to the mountains of Snowdonia, it occupies a coastal site on the south-eastern shore of the Isle of Anglesey (Ynys Môn), overlooking the Menai Strait and the 'beautiful marsh' (*beau maris*) that gave the town its name. The castle there was begun in early 1295, but Edward's intention to make use of the site may date back rather earlier, to 1282-3, when he was there in person and when the place was being used to create a pontoon bridge across the Strait.³³ At this time there was already a fairly prosperous port town close to where Beaumaris was sited. This was Llanfaes, an old-established Welsh settlement (*maerdref*) with an ancient church ('llan faes'). Nearby, Llywelyn ab Iorwerth founded a Franciscan friary in 1237, and during the latter half of the thirteenth century, during the time of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, a town comprising some 120 properties was present there with inhabitants involved in fishing, ferrying, and sea-trading, the latter linking them with Gascony and Liverpool.³⁴ Llanfaes was burnt in 1294 in a Welsh revolt under Madoc ap Llywelyn,³⁵ and in its place was built Edward's new town and castle of Beaumaris.

The Welsh revolt of 1294 gave urgency to the need to start work on a new castle. In the November of that year Henry Latham of Lancashire was instructed to take men and materials to Anglesey, including diggers and carpenters who 'would perhaps undertake such preliminary site work as the digging of trial holes and the erection of huts to accommodate the larger bodies of men that would follow'.³⁶ On April 17 1295, Master James of St George, the king's master mason in north Wales, received monies to start the building, and Edward who was also there at this time appointed Walter of Winchester as clerk of the new works.³⁷ Work at Beaumaris proceeded as a matter of priority throughout the summer as payments were transferred to the castle site from other projects, and its workers kept busy excavating the new moat as well as putting up a barricade around the site to protect it, the king having paid a final visit in July before leaving Wales.³⁸ By the end of February 1296 Master James and Walter of Winchester set out in a letter to the royal exchequer what had been achieved by then and what enormous progress they had made, as well as what still needed to be done, which included making a dock so that 'at high tide a forty-ton vessel will be able to come fully-laden right up to the castle gateway'.³⁹ By 1296, then, the castle was taking shape, as too was the new town.

Edward had seen to it that Llanfaes was rendered uninhabitable by its Welsh townspeople, and their former houses were taken down and used to make the buildings of the new town nearby.⁴⁰ In the process the inhabitants were moved to a new location further west on the

³³ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.103-4.

³⁴ I. Soulsby, *The Towns of Medieval Wales* (Phillimore, Chichester, 1983), p.166. The town was in the hands of the Welsh princes and no borough charter is known. In 1294 its burgesses yielded £8 8s 5³/₄d, see Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.51.

³⁵ Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.166, citing CCLR 1318-23, p.71.

³⁶ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.103-4.

³⁷ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.104; on Master James see A.J. Taylor, 'Master James of St George', *English Historical Review* 65 (1950), pp.433-57.

³⁸ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.105.

³⁹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.106-7.

⁴⁰ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.49; Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.110-111.

island, to a new town sited at Rhosfair, called Newborough, a site of a royal Welsh palace.⁴¹ By removing not only the townspeople of Llanfaes but also eradicating traces of their town the king's intention was clearly to erase the Welsh presence. Even so, some thirty of them still held on there, and were fined for their delay.⁴² As the inhabitants of Llanfaes were being moved on, the new town of Beaumaris was formed, but as is usual for this period very little is recorded of this process, especially compared to the more thorough surviving account of the castle building. The new town received its borough charter on 12 September 1296.⁴³ This was some six months after the letter Master James and Walter of Winchester sent to the exchequer, and presumably work on the town had proceeded during this intervening time as it had done on the adjoining castle. The charter was written using the same terms as an earlier charter issued to Conwy whereby the town became a 'free borough' and the constable of the castle 'the mayor of the borough', to whom the burgesses presented two nominated bailiffs from their community 'every year on the feast of St Michael'.⁴⁴ As was usual for Edward's new towns in Wales, the burgesses of Beaumaris were also granted the right to have a merchant gild, and a clause inserted stipulating that 'if any man's bondman shall dwell in the town... for a year and a day without being claimed... he shall remain a free man in that town'.⁴⁵ The charter made Beaumaris an attractive prospect to immigrants who sought to take up residence and trade there, and gave some countryfolk opportunity to lose the ties binding them to their lord and his land.

The privileges set out in the charter for Beaumaris were derived from those 'used in the city of Hereford'.⁴⁶ This was a commonplace legal borrowing in the founding of new towns in Wales during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁴⁷ But the actual wording of the charter itself was derived from that previously issued to Conwy in 1284. This connection between the two town charters becomes significant for interpreting their respective town plans. Of the precision involved in the laying out of Beaumaris, a clue is provided in a royal account in which the original size of the burgages is stated to be eighty feet deep by forty feet wide.⁴⁸ This compared a little unfavourably to the size of the burgages at nearby Caernarfon, which were rather larger at eighty feet deep and sixty feet wide,⁴⁹ but in terms of its population size Beaumaris was from the start a larger town than Caernarfon, even though it was founded some ten years afterwards. In the earliest account of the town's fiscal contribution to the king's coffers, dating to 1305, 132¹/₄ rented burgages in Beaumaris are recorded, a figure that rises to 154 by 1322.⁵⁰ During the same period only Aberystwyth and Conwy came close to this number in this part of north Wales, a clear indication not only of the relatively large size of Beaumaris compared with Edward's other new towns, but also the greater aspirations that its founder had for the place.

⁴¹ Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.166; see Newborough.

⁴² M.W. Beresford, *New Towns of the Middle Ages* (Lutterworth, London, 1967), pp.49-50, citing PRO: E 101/109/2.

⁴³ CChR 1257-1300, p.465.

⁴⁴ CChR 1257-1300, pp.276-77.

⁴⁵ CChR 1257-1300, pp.276-77; see G. Usher, 'The foundation of an Edwardian borough: the Beaumaris charter 1296', *Transactions of the Anglesey Archaeological Society* (1967), pp.1-16.

⁴⁶ CChR 1257-1300, p.277; Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.282.

⁴⁷ M. Bateson, 'The laws of Breteuil', *English Historical Review* 15 (1900), pp.73-8, 302-18, 496-523, 754-7; 16 (1901), pp.92-110, 332-45.

⁴⁸ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.63.

⁴⁹ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.63.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, pp.51, 66. The 1305 rental is printed in a supplement to *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 1 (1877), pp.xiv-xix, headed 'Extent of burgages, lands, etc, assigned for the castle of Beaumaris'.

One of the uncertainties about the early history of Beaumaris concerns whether or not it originally had town defences like its neighbouring and near-contemporaries of Conwy and Caernarfon. In 1407, following an attack by Owain Glyndŵr in 1403 in which part of Beaumaris was burned, the burgesses received from the Prince of Wales a donation of £10 'in aid of making a ditch round the aforesaid town', and soon after, in 1414, work on it had clearly begun as the new building of a stone wall encircling the town had required the loss of 30 of the town's burgages.⁵¹ The circuit of this wall is shown by a map of 1610 by John Speed, and it linked to the walls of the castle.⁵² It ran along the seashore, then northwards across Castle Street parallel to Steeple Lane before turning sharply east to cross Church Street where its remnants still survive. This is the circuit marked by the Ordnance Survey and shown on a map of the town's historical monuments.⁵³ However, an earlier and larger circuit is also discernable. This is apparent from archaeological work west of the castle, which revealed a shallow ditch running south-westwards.⁵⁴ The alignment of this, if extended, would join with the moat of the castle – which David the Dyker of Caernarvon was employed on 'perfecting' between 1312 and 1315⁵⁵ – and in the opposite direction would link with the surviving remains of the town wall east of Church Street. If this is accepted then the alignment of the ditch may have continued on around the town, running parallel to New Street and turning south where the street makes a ninety degree turn. This larger coffin-shaped circuit would have taken in all of the town, beyond the fifteenth century defences. The fact that 30 burgages had been lost in building the latter suggests that the Steeple Street area was by then built up, a thesis that relates to the design and planning of the new town.

Beaumaris was clearly an ambitious foundation and right from the start was reasonably successful. It continued to survive through the later middle ages as the island's main port and administrative centre.⁵⁶ The king had ensured the town's dominance for he himself had 'enacted that all ships nearing the coast-line of Anglesey should call at Beaumaris, and there display their goods and merchandise for sale, and not elsewhere'.⁵⁷ But the initial economic success of the new town was perhaps also at least partly owed to the legacy of its prosperous Welsh precursor, which it replaced. In creating their new town at Beaumaris, then, Edward and his men were capitalising on the fortunes of the older town of Llanfaes.

⁵¹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.111, citing PRO: SC 6/1216/2 and 6/1152/5; also Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.79.

⁵² The foundations of the town wall are visible where they meet the castle defences.

⁵³ RCAHMW, *An Inventory of the Ancient and Historical Monuments in Anglesey* (HMSO, London, 1937), pp.cxlvi-cxlix, 8-13.

⁵⁴ Excavation report: Anon., *Archaeological Assessment of the Site of Former Outdoor Activities Centre, Beaumaris (G1044)* (Gwynedd Archaeological Trust report 28, c.1985); P.J. Fasham, 'Investigations in 1985 by R.B. White at Castle Meadows, Beaumaris', *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society and Field Club* (1992), pp.123-130. The ditch was not fully excavated. It is not dated with certainty though fourteenth century ceramics were found in its upper fill.

⁵⁵ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.113: 10½ perches of moat were to be perfected by David, a length of some 170 feet.

⁵⁶ Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, p.80.

⁵⁷ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.206.