

CAERNARFON

- Early history of the town

Of all Edward's walled castle-towns in Wales, Caernarfon is perhaps the most celebrated and renowned. Yet, it was a rather small town compared with the others, seemingly under-sized for its massively-built town walls and the spectacular castle that literally overshadows it. As at Rhuddlan and Beaumaris, there was an existing town in place at Caernarfon before the reign of Edward. Prior to Edward's castle, an earthen motte stood on the site, built around 1090 under the Norman earl of Chester, Hugh of Avranches.⁷³ By Edward's time, this Norman settlement was in Welsh hands and was a port with a borough court.⁷⁴ In this context, the situation at Caernarfon was similar to that at Llanfaes situated on Anglesey, across the Menai Strait from Caernarfon, where a Welsh settlement had also preceded the foundation of the new town of Beaumaris. At Caernarfon, then, those who came to build Edward his new town on the banks of the Seiont river, on a commanding promontory overlooking the Strait, were making good use of an established settlement site with already existing trading links, and with the remains of an earlier Norman castle providing a ready basis on which to build their new castle.⁷⁵

Work began on the walled town and castle in the summer of 1283, following the second Welsh war of 1282-3 as English forces moved west into the heartland of Snowdonia. During June and July, these preliminaries included digging the 'new moat' for the castle, and demolishing existing houses to make way for the town and its defences, as well as creating a timber palisade around the whole site to protect it and its workers.⁷⁶ Taking the timbers away from the houses took 20 men five days, while the palisade around the building site had originally been made for use in the town defences of Rhuddlan but under the king's orders was brought to Caernarfon as it was more urgently needed there.⁷⁷ During July, a Master Mannasser de Vaucoleurs was responsible for the earthworks, and work at this preliminary stage clearly encompassed both the town and the castle, the whole enterprise being overseen from the start by Eustace de Hache, a household knight, along with a clerk of works, John of Dunster.⁷⁸ Hugh of Leominster and Roger Cosyn succeeded Dunster as clerks during late 1283 and 1284, but of the castle construction at Caernarfon compared to the near-neighbours of Conwy and Harlech little is known of 'the identity of the principal masters employed in the formative stages', excepting that Walter of Hereford was the mason employed during the later stages of its building in the 1290s.⁷⁹ Arnold Taylor marshals documentary evidence to make a case that the architect-mason Master James of St George had an important role in the early design of Caernarfon castle (together with Master Richard, the Engineer, of Chester), also pointing out architectural similarities between Caernarfon and the castle at Conwy, where Master James was certainly at work.⁸⁰

⁷³ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.77-8.

⁷⁴ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.46; K. Williams-Jones, 'Caernarvon', in R.A. Griffiths (ed.), *Boroughs of Mediaeval Wales* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1978), p.75.

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.77-8; RCAHMW, *An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments in Caernarvonshire*, volume II: central, the cantref of Arfon and the commote of Eifionydd (HMSO, London, 1960), p.115.

⁷⁶ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.79-80.

⁷⁷ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.31, 79.

⁷⁸ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.79-80.

⁷⁹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.81-82, 86-89.

⁸⁰ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.100-101.

Between August 1284 and November 1285 emphasis shifted from the castle towards constructing the town's walls, gates and towers, as during this period more than half the annual expenditure on building work at Caernarfon went on them.⁸¹ Having already dug the outer earthen defences, work on the town's walls began. This was in the week of Monday October 9 1284, and it has been suggested that this occasion 'may conceivably have been timed to coincide with a formal presentation by the king of the borough's charter', when Edward was himself at Caernarfon on October 10 and 11.⁸² The charter itself had actually been witnessed earlier, at Flint on September 8, when equivalent charters were issued to the new towns of Flint, Rhuddlan and Conwy.⁸³ It was issued using the same terms as Conwy's charter, which in turn was based upon the laws of the city of Hereford, and included in it were the usual borough privileges of Edward's towns in Wales, such as the right of burgesses to choose two bailiffs and present them to the mayor (who was also constable of the castle), as well as the right to have a merchant guild.⁸⁴ The borough charter was granted just over a year after the initial groundworks were started therefore, including the earthwork defences dug around the town, but before the town walls were built. This first year was probably also the time the streets and building plots were set out on the ground, a process that is not itself documented. That this was done with some precision in mind is shown by the fact that the town's original burgages were all to conform to a standard size, sixty feet broad by eighty feet deep.⁸⁵ In the case of Caernarfon, then, it is clear that the town was created in physical form before its legal foundation as a chartered borough.

Outside the town's defences further work was going on between May and November 1285. A new quay was being constructed from timber and earth, the latter dug from the ditch around the castle, while to the east of the town a large mill-pond was created, the King's Pool.⁸⁶ Certainly the quay would help promote the town's commercial function. This is also the time individual burgesses are first recorded in Caernarfon, when some nine months after the date of the town's charter, two burgesses, William Faucil and Bernard de Weisak, sought the king's protection.⁸⁷ A full list of the town's burgesses was compiled a few years later in 1298, following a Welsh uprising under Madoc ap Llywelyn which had seen the castle and town of Caernarfon burned, and some destruction of the town walls occur.⁸⁸ During 1295 and early 1296 Caernarfon's walls were rebuilt under the architect-mason Walter of Hereford.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, as part of his overall duty securing the king's peace in Snowdonia, the King's Justice, John de Havering, drew up a list of the town's burgesses and the property they held.⁹⁰ The town was by then over ten years old and was clearly attracting new burgesses who had presumably come to take up burgage plots for building houses and workshops. Some early inhabitants were those directly involved in the preliminary setting-out and building work, including Masters Mannasser of Vaucoleurs,

⁸¹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.82. In this period, a total of £3040 5s 6½d was spent on the new works.

⁸² Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.82.

⁸³ CChR 1257-1300, p.278; CWR, p.289.

⁸⁴ CChR 1257-1300, pp.277-78.

⁸⁵ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, p.63, citing Minister's Accounts of 1305-6 (PRO: SC6/1170/4).

⁸⁶ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.83.

⁸⁷ CPR 1281-92, p.177.

⁸⁸ T. Jones Pierce and J. Griffiths, 'Documents relating to the early history of the borough of Caernarvon', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 9 (1937-9), pp.238-40; Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.85.

⁸⁹ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.86-89.

⁹⁰ Jones Pierce and Griffiths, 'Early history of the borough of Caernarvon', p.236; Williams Jones, 'Caernarvon', pp.80-1.

Hugh of Leominster, and Walter of Hereford.⁹¹ The total number of burgesses recorded in the 1298 rental is 57, and some surnames reveal the sorts of places they had come from, including overseas but more typically the English midlands and Welsh borders.⁹² Not all held a whole burgage. Some had halves, showing that sub-division of the original plots had already begun. Later surviving property transfer deeds from the fourteenth century show an active property market was at work within the framework of pre-existing burgages, and the 1298 rental itself shows evidence that plots were soon changing hands as burgesses left and new ones arrived.⁹³

From its inception, then, and despite the interruption caused by the Welsh attack on the town in 1295, Caernarfon was a successful urban venture. By 1295 it was a walled town, with a quayside for ships, and with a borough charter and around 60 burgages conforming to a standard dimension. About half the size of its close neighbours and contemporaries of Conwy and Beaumaris it was by comparison a relatively small borough, but in contrast the castle at Caernarfon was the most impressive and enduring symbol of Edward's conquest and settlement of north Wales, imbued with an imperial iconography that connected him and his empire with that of ancient Rome and its emperors.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Williams Jones, 'Caernarvon', pp.80-1.

⁹² The total number of names listed on the rental is 62 (PRO: SC12/17/86), but five names appear to have been added, suggesting the 1298 number was actually 57 burgesses. Jones Pierce and Griffiths, 'Early history of the borough of Caernarvon', pp.238-40. By 1305 the total figure was down to 53, Williams Jones, 'Caernarvon', pp.82-3.

⁹³ Jones Pierce and Griffiths, 'Early history of the borough of Caernarvon', pp.241-46. One such transfer (of the 1330s?) involved a plot measuring 20 by 85 feet, this being a third of the width of the original burgage size, and just a fraction deeper. Manuscript alterations made to the 1298 survey show which burgesses had changed.

⁹⁴ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, pp.78-9.