

HARLECH

- Design and plan of the town

Despite its awkward site, perched high upon a rocky cliff-face, Harlech castle is one of the most perfectly symmetrically formed of Edward's castles in Wales – a 'splendid example of Edwardian military architecture'.²⁵¹ It's surrounded by a deep rock-cut ditch, excavated over six months between April and November 1285 at a cost of just over £205.²⁵² By contrast the plan of the new town is unimpressive. It comprises one main street that winds uphill past the castle gates and then proceeds along a straighter section, with no obvious open area for a market place unless it's represented by a squarish shaped piece of land just outside the entrance to the castle, a likely spot. The change in form in the two halves of High Street is marked by a cross street, where the site of a chapel stood, as is shown by John Speed's plan of 1610.²⁵³ The former medieval layout of Harlech was disrupted by road improvements made during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to lessen gradients for coaches. Facing the single main street is a discernable line of plots, starting at the site of the mill at the north end of the town and continuing southwards. The cross street in contrast does not appear to have had plots laid out along it. There is no documented standard burgage size for Harlech (unlike Cricieth) but field measurements made of plot frontages along the main street revealed a number measuring around 30 feet (10m), and there is some semblance of regularity in the widths of plots shown by the first edition Ordnance Survey plan.²⁵⁴

As to the designer of the new town, again like Cricieth there is only uncertainty. The most likely candidates are the royal agents appointed in August 1283 by the king, or perhaps Hugh of Leominster, if it is accepted that clerks of works were responsible for such matters as town planning. Either way, the result is a town plan that has few distinguishing features; nothing of the castle's geometry certainly, and indeed no obvious similarities with any other of the new towns of 1283-4 in north Wales. The impression is that in comparison to the castle little thought was given to the design of the town, as if the town at Harlech was not of that great importance, as indeed turned out to be the case.

²⁵¹ RCAHMS, *Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Wales and Monmouthshire IV – county of Merioneth* (HMSO, London, 1910), p.59.

²⁵² Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.66.

²⁵³ See Soulsby, *Towns of Medieval Wales*, pp.138-9.

²⁵⁴ For survey information see 'Data downloads'.