

HARLECH

- 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.²³⁶ 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.²³⁷ 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.²³⁸ 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.²³⁹

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 1283.²⁴⁰ Soon after this the town was chartered as a 'free borough', its customs and privileges being modeled on those of Conwy.²⁴¹ 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.²⁴² 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 £9500.²⁴³ By 1294, the castle had twenty-seven soldiers, while residing in the adjoining new town were eleven men, twelve women and twenty-one children.²⁴⁴ Three of the men had Welsh names.²⁴⁵ The Lay Subsidy roll for Merioneth (of 1292-3) records 12 taxpayers in Harlech.²⁴⁶ 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 1312.²⁴⁷ The market generated five shillings a year in 1304-5.²⁴⁸ It was held on Saturdays and the town had two fairs during the year, but the site of the town,

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 and 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'.

²⁴⁰ Taylor, *Welsh Castles*, p.66, citing CWR, p.291.

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.

²⁴⁶ *Merioneth Lay Subsidy Roll of 1292/3*, ed. K. Williams-Jones (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1976), pp.65-6.

²⁴⁷ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, pp.54, 66.

²⁴⁸ Lewis, 'Account roll of the Chamberlain', p.263.

‘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.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 £540.²⁵⁰

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).

²⁵⁰ Lewis, *Mediaeval Boroughs*, pp.201-2.