

JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY: THE WALLS OF CONWY

One of the best-preserved medieval walled towns anywhere in Europe, Conwy is set adjacent to its famous castle amidst spectacular natural scenery. Oliver Creighton and Robert Higham explore the turbulent medieval history and present-day heritage of this modestly sized but precious urban gem.

Conwy is world renowned for its mighty castle, commonly held to be a masterpiece of thirteenth-century military architecture. One of a ring of royal fortresses built by Edward I (reigned 1272-1307) to conquer and hold down the power base of the Welsh princes, the castle rises gritty and magnificent on a rocky spine against the dramatic skyline of Snowdonia. Less well known, however, is Conwy's town wall. One of the very finest in Britain and, indeed comparing favourably with any in Europe's on account of its near total preservation, the embattled circuit embraces the borough chartered by the king in 1284 that lay at the castle's foot. Here, castle and town were designed to be complementary, the royal castle linked physically to a planned settlement for new English colonists, and displaying the partnership of military and economic means through which Edward subjugated the newly conquered principality. Today, the small but busy town, still contained within its walls, provides a vivid impression of a medieval walled community reminiscent of one of the 'bastides' of southwest France that Edward and his planners seem to have had in mind when laying the place out.

Natural defence and a safe anchorage provided obvious advantages for the borough, but there were historic reasons, too, why Edward selected this spot for his new fortress-town. Unlike many newly planted towns of the middle ages, Conwy was not located on a 'greenfield' site. Rather, it occupied the site of a residence of the Welsh princes and the Cistercian abbey of St Mary founded by them. Representing the spiritual heart of the Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd, the abbey marked the burial place of several native princes and the great Welsh statesman Llywelyn ap Iwerth, or, Llywelyn 'the Great' (d. 1240). Edward ensured that these Welsh connections were stripped away: the monastery was re-founded on a new site some eight miles up river (and Llywelyn's body moved with it), leaving its church as the parish church of the new town, while after a short period of use the hall was systematically demolished and its timbers transported for re-use in another one of Edward's new castles at Caernarfon. At Conwy the foundation of town and castle thus had symbolic as well as military and economic value: together, they represented a monument to English colonisation, reflecting the replacement of an old authority with a new one.

Both the castle and the walled town appended to it were built in a whirlwind campaign started in 1283 and lasting four and a half years at a cost of £14,000 to the king. Just under 1.3 kilometres in length, studded with 21 half-round towers and three gates, and pieced by some 480 arrow loops, the circuit is a remarkably unified fortification. The speed of the wall's construction contrasts markedly with most other medieval town wall-building enterprises, which were often protracted affairs (Coventry's wall took 200 years!). In the absence of any significant later alterations it gives an unusually clear idea of the character of a small medieval walled community. Among the many remarkable features of Conwy's town wall is a unique series of twelve garderobes – or medieval privies – that overhang the exterior wall face, the grooves for wooden seats still visible. These were not conveniences for the townsfolk, however, but served the administrative staff of the king's wardrobe and the Office of the King's Works. Surviving building accounts catalogue in meticulous detail the immense resources marshalled for this project. Woodcutters, diggers and carpenters as well as masons drawn from across England and even beyond feature in a vast work-force of up to 1,500, while the long-list of materials includes scaffolding, charcoal, ropes and lead. From these sources we know that parts of the wall at least were washed with lime to present a gleaming white vision of Edwardian conquest. Like Caernarfon, further up the coast of North Wales, where the castle's polygonal towers and banded masonry were apparently built in emulation of Constantinople, here too, medieval fortification was also political propaganda.

But Conwy's heyday was shortlived. Originally intended as the shire town for one of the new counties created by Edward I (this function was taken by Caernarfon), the majesty of the castle and town wall was always at odds with a relatively small community of limited means. In 1312, 124 plots were occupied within the circuit and the town also had suburbs, but thereafter shrinkage and retrenchment set in. Medieval Conwy's fortunes were always tied to those of the castle (the constable of the fortress was also the mayor of the town), and when royal interest in this waned the consequences were inevitable. From the 1320s onwards, surveys paint a picture of a castle becoming dilapidated, its timbers rotting and roofs falling apart, with brief episodes of repair. In 1401 the once seemingly impregnable castle was taken in daring fashion by supporters of Owain Glyn Dŵr and the town seriously mauled, the estimate of £16,000 worth of damage being many times in excess of the figure at Beaumaris and Caernarfon which were also attacked by rebels. Conwy's economy was gradually rehabilitated but never recovered fully. It was hit hard by the plague in 1607 and, stagnating and declining in the post-medieval period, large open areas existed within the walls. In the late eighteenth century the travel writer Thomas

Pennant captured the town's faded grandeur: 'a more ragged town is scarcely to be seen, within or a more beautiful, without'.

The town remained something of a backwater until the construction of Telford's road bridge in the 1820s which, followed shortly by the Chester and Holyhead railway, led to increasing appreciation of Conwy's immense historic value. In the second half of the nineteenth century Conwy boasted an embryonic tourist industry, which alongside the traditional fishing and slate industries, kick-started a revival. This period saw the first attempts to preserve the fabric of the crumbling town wall through repairs and small-scale rebuilding, so that by the end of the century parts of the parapet walk could be used for perambulations.

The castle and town wall have been sensitively managed by Cadw since 1984 and Conwy's international significance was reflected in its designation (along with Beaumaris, Caernarfon and Harlech) in 1986 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Careful town planning has ensured that housing development is still largely contained within the walled circuit and views of the whole ensemble enhanced through selective removal since the 1950s of relatively recent vernacular structures encumbering the walls. But Conwy's remarkable heritage has a dual character. This most English of monuments lies at the heart of one of the most 'Welsh' parts of Wales, and some might question whether the policies of heritage agencies have enhanced this monument to English colonialism at the expense of 'Welsh' heritage. Yet the present day visitor will note that it is Llywelyn's statue that stands in the town square, while it is the Red Dragon of Wales and the Celtic cross of Cadw that now fly from Edward's famous castles.

FURTHER READING

The definitive guide to the construction of the castle and town walls of Conwy is provided by Arnold Taylor in *The King's Works in Wales 1277-1330* (HMSO, 1974). The Cadw guidebook *Conwy Castle and Town Walls* originally written by Taylor and now in its fifth edition (2003) with many new maps and images is the best detailed guide to the town walls at first hand.

Much new information about the history and archaeology of medieval town walls is also provided in a new book on the subject by O.Creighton and R. Higham (see below).

The world-wide-web is also an increasingly important tool for researching town walls. New digital surveys of the Edwardian castles and planned towns of north Wales have been carried out by Queen's

University, Belfast, and can be explored online at www.qub.ac.uk/urban_mapping/. The Walled Towns Friendship Circle is an international organisation for the sustainable development of walled towns, and links to its member towns can be found at www.walledtowns.com/.

FACT FILE

Getting there by road

Conwy is just off the A55, which links it to Chester and the Northwest of England (via the M53 or M56). From central Wales, the A470 provides a more scenic link. Conwy is an excellent base for exploring the other spectacular Edwardian castles of North Wales, including Beaumaris, Caernarfon, Flint and Rhuddlan.

Getting there by rail

Llandudno Junction, approximately one kilometre to the east on the opposite side of the river, is the main railway station, though other local services do stop at the station in Conwy. National Rail Enquiries. Tel: (08457) 484950.

Tourist information

Conwy tourist information office shares the same building as the Conwy Castle Visitor Centre. Tel: (01492) 592248.

PLACES TO VISIT

Conwy castle. No visit to the town can be complete without exploring the thirteenth-century castle, arguably the most magnificent of Edward I's great fortresses in North Wales. Cadw. Tel: (01492) 592358.

Aberconwy house. A remarkably well preserved medieval merchant's house with a projecting timber 'jetty', representing one of the very earliest such buildings in Wales. National Trust. Tel: (01492) 592246.

'The smallest house in Britain'. A little over three metres high and 1.8 metres wide, Conwy has one of the smallest domestic

buildings in the UK. Lying on the quayside, this was inhabited until the turn of the nineteenth century. Tel: (01492) 593429.

Thomas Telford's Conwy suspension bridge. Opened in 1826, this remarkable feat of engineering is now a National Trust Property. Tel: (01492) 573282.

Plas Mawr. An Elizabethan mansion house built for the important merchant Robert Wynn of Gwydir. Fully restored, and arguably the finest townhouse of this period anywhere in Britain. Cadw. Tel: (01492) 580167.

A NEW BOOK ON TOWNWALLS

The walls of royal fortress-towns such as Conwy owed their origin to specific military circumstances, but in the majority of cases town walls evolved over long periods and involved the interplay of many urban interest groups.

Published by Tempus Books in 2005, O. Creighton and R. Higham's *Medieval Town Walls: An Archaeology and Social History of Urban Defence* provides the first treatment of this fascinating subject in book form for over thirty years.

Covering material primarily from the eve of the Norman Conquest to the aftermath of the Civil Wars of the seventeenth century, it explores town walls not only as defensive features but also as symbols of privilege and status, and reviews different approaches to their study – historical, architectural, topographical, and archaeological. While famous walled cities such as York and Chester are examined, so too are those places whose defences are fragmentary or even vanished, as at Bristol and Coventry.