Oliver CREIGHTON

'CASTLES OF COMMUNITIES[1]':

MEDIEVAL TOWN DEFENCES IN ENGLAND; WALES AND GASCONY

INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER INTRODUCES the findings of a research project exploring the phenomenon of town defences in the later medieval period[2]. The research is aiming to exploit the full range of available source material – including architectural, cartographic, documentary, archaeological and topographical data – to compile a database of fortified towns in the period *c*. 1050-1550. A secondary objective is the interpretation of town walls within the broader context of the townscapes they enclosed and the communities that built and maintained them[3]. This paper serves two purposes: first, it provides a summary of key data regarding the number of fortified towns in England and Wales and the character of their defences; and, second, it presents a case study of the defences of bastide towns in England, Wales and 'English' Gascony.

This research is endeavouring to address deficiencies in our understanding of the subject in a number of areas. Overall, town defences have attracted comparatively little serious scholarship relative to their better studied cousins, castles. Perhaps lacking something of the glamour of 'private' fortifications and frequently leaving vestigial physical remains ravaged by development (or in numerous cases no aboveground evidence), urban defences are, at best, a neglected branch of scholarship and, in Britain at least, perhaps perceived as second-rate features of medieval fortification.

Moreover, their study has been heavily biased towards a handful of 'gem' towns and cities preserving monumental circuits, affording a somewhat skewed impression of traditions of urban defence in the middle ages. The principal textbook on town walls, meanwhile, focuses overwhelmingly on documentary evidence and is deficient concerning earth and timber fortifications[4], while despite some valuable studies of the defences of individual places[5], overviews are few[6]. Moreover, on the wider European stage the urban defences of England and Wales have been perceived as comparing poorly relative to their continental counterparts in terms of scale, investment and longevity through and beyond the medieval period. In a recent globally based synthesis of the town wall phenomenon, for instance, the British evidence received fleeting mention, with a single place – Winchester – mentioned by name[7]. Accordingly, this research is paying full attention to the occurrence of town defences across the urban hierarchy, including smaller settlements and those with earthwork circuits. In addition, the frequently underestimated social, symbolic and economic purposes of town walls are given due consideration alongside their defensive functions. Finally, the research is critically addressing the apparent truism that town defences did, indeed, represent 'communal' fortifications.
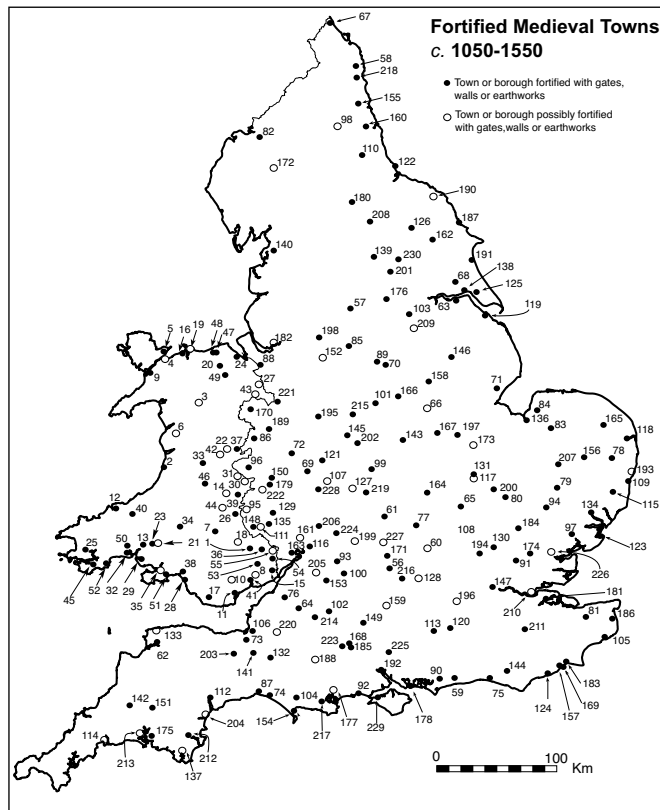

Fig. 1.1: Distribution map of fortified medieval towns in England and Wales, c. 1050-1550; see Fig. 1.2 for the full list of places.

1, **Abergavenny**, Stone walls
2, **Aberystwyth**, Stone walls
3, **Bala**, Earthworks?
4, **Bangor**, Stone walls?
5, **Beaumaris**, Stone walls
6, **Bere**, Earthworks?
7, **Brecon**, Stone walls
8, **Caerleon**, Re-used Roman defences?
9, **Caernarfon**, Stone walls
10, **Caerphilly**, Earthworks?
11, **Cardiff**, Stone walls
12, **Cardigan**, Stone walls
13, **Carmarthen**, Stone walls
14, **Cefnllys**, Earthworks?
15, **Chepstow**, Stone walls
16, **Conwy**, Stone walls
17, **Cowbridge**, Stone walls
18, **Crickhowell**, Stone walls?
19, **Degannwy**, Stone walls
20, **Denbigh**, Stone walls
21, **Dinefwr**, Stone walls
22, **Dolforwyn**, Earthworks?
23, **Dryslwyn**, Stone walls
24, **Flint**, Earthworks
25, **Haverfordwest**, Stone walls
26, **Hay-on-Wye**, Stone walls
27, **Holt**, Stone walls?
28, **Kenfig**, Earthworks
29, **Kidwelly**, Stone walls
30, **Knighton**, Earthworks?
31, **Knucklas**, Earthworks?
32, **Laugharne**, Earthworks
33, **Llanidloes**, Earthworks
34, **Llandovery**, Earthworks
35, **Loughor**, Re-used Roman defences?
36, **Monmouth**, Stone walls
37, **Montgomery**, Stone walls
38, **Neath**, Stone walls
39, **New Radnor**, Earthworks
40, **Newcastle Emlyn**, Earthworks
41, **Newport**, Stone walls
42, **Newtown**, Earthworks?
43, **Overton**, Stone walls?
44, **Painscastle**, Earthworks?
45, **Pembroke**, Stone walls
46, **Rhayader**, Earthworks
47, **Rhuddlan I**, Earthworks
48, **Rhuddlan II**, Earthworks
49, **Ruthyn**, Earthworks
50, **St Clears**, Earthworks
51, **Swansea**, Stone walls
52, **Tenby**, Stone walls
53, **Trelech**, Earthworks
54, **Usk**, Earthworks
55, **Whitecastle**, Earthworks
56, **Abingdon**, Gates
57, **Almondbury**, Earthworks
58, **Alnwick**, Stone walls
59, **Arundel**, Stone walls
60, **Aylesbury**, Earthworks?
61, **Banbury**, Gates
62, **Barnstaple**, Stone walls
63, **Barton-upon-Humber**, Earthworks
64, **Bath**, Stone walls
65, **Bedford**, Earthworks
66, **Belvoir**, Earthworks?
67, **Berwick-upon-Tweed**, Stone walls
68, **Beverley**, Earthworks
69, **Bewdley**, Gates
70, **Bolsover**, Earthworks
71, **Boston**, Brick walls
72, **Bridgnorth**, Stone walls
73, **Bridgwater**, Earthworks
74, **Bridport**, Earthworks
75, **Brighton**, Stone walls
76, **Bristol**, Stone walls
77, **Buckingham**, Earthworks

78, **Bungay**, Earthworks
79, **Bury St Edmunds**, Stone walls
80, **Cambridge**, Earthworks
81, **Canterbury**, Stone walls
82, **Carlisle**, Stone walls
83, **Castle Acre**, Stone walls
84, **Castle Rising**, Earthworks
85, **Castleton**, Earthworks
86, **Caus**, Earthworks
87, **Charmouth**, Earthworks
88, **Chester**, Stone walls
89, **Chesterfield**, Earthworks
90, **Chichester**, Stone walls
91, **Chipping Ongar**, Earthworks?
92, **Christchurch**, Stone walls
93, **Cirencester**, Stone walls
94, **Clare**, Earthworks
95, **Clifford Town**, Earthworks?
96, **Clun**, Earthworks
97, **Colchester**, Stone walls
98, **Corbridge**, Earthworks?
99, **Coventry**, Stone walls
100, **Cricklade**, Stone walls
101, **Derby**, Earthworks
102, **Devizes**, Earthworks
103, **Doncaster**, Earthworks
104, **Dorchester**, Stone walls
105, **Dover**, Stone walls
106, **Downend**, Earthworks
107, **Droitwich**, Gates?
108, **Dunstable**, Earthworks?
109, **Dunwich**, Earthworks
110, **Durham**, Stone walls
111, **Ewyas Harold**, Earthworks?
112, **Exeter**, Stone walls
113, **Farnham**, Earthworks
114, **Fowey**, Stone walls?
115, **Framlingham**, Earthworks
116, **Gloucester**, Stone walls
117, **Godmanchester**, Earthworks?
118, **Great Yarmouth**, Stone walls
119, **Grimsby**, Stone walls
120, **Guildford**, Earthworks
121, **Halesowen**, Gates
122, **Hartlepool**, Stone walls
123, **Harwich**, Stone walls
124, **Hastings**, Stone walls
125, **Hedon**, Earthworks
126, **Helmsley**, Earthworks
127, **Henley-in-Arden**, Gates?
128, **Henley-on-Thames**, Stone walls?
129, **Hereford**, Stone walls
130, **Hertford**, Earthworks
131, **Huntingdon**, Earthworks
132, **Ilchester**, Stone walls
133, **Ilfracombe**, Gates
134, **Ipswich**, Earthworks
135, **Kilpeck**, Earthworks
136, **King's Lynn**, Stone walls
137, **Kingsbridge**, Earthworks?
138, **Kingston-upon-Hull**, Brick walls
139, **Knaresborough**, Earthworks
140, **Lancaster**, Stone walls
141, **Langport**, Earthworks
142, **Launceston**, Stone walls
143, **Leicester**, Stone walls
144, **Lewes**, Stone walls
145, **Lichfield**, Earthworks
146, **Lincoln**, Stone walls
147, **London**, Stone walls
148, **Longtown**, Earthworks
149, **Ludgershall**, Earthworks
150, **Ludlow**, Stone walls
151, **Lydford**, Stone walls
152, **Macclesfield**, Earthworks?
153, **Malmesbury**, Stone walls?
154, **Melcombe Regis**, Earthworks

155, **Morpeth**, Gates
156, **New Buckenham**, Earthworks
157, **New Winchelsea**, Stone walls
158, **Newark-on-Trent**, Stone walls
159, **Newbury**, Earthworks?
160, **Newcastle-upon-Tyne**, Stone walls
161, **Newent**, Earthworks?
162, **New-Malton**, Stone walls
163, **Newnham-on-Severn**, Earthworks
164, **Northampton**, Stone walls
165, **Norwich**, Stone walls
166, **Nottingham**, Stone walls
167, **Oakham**, Earthworks
168, **Old Sarum**, Stone walls
169, **Old Winchelsea**, Stone walls
170, **Oswestry**, Stone walls
171, **Oxford**, Stone walls
172, **Penrith**, Stone walls?
173, **Peterborough**, Stone walls?
174, **Pleshey**, Earthworks
175, **Plymouth**, Stone walls
176, **Pontefract**, Earthworks
177, **Poole**, Stone walls
178, **Portsmouth**, Stone walls
179, **Richards Castle**, Earthworks
180, **Richmond**, Stone walls
181, **Rochester**, Stone walls
182, **Runcorn**, Earthworks?
183, **Rye**, Stone walls
184, **Saffron Walden**, Earthworks
185, **Salisbury**, Earthworks
186, **Sandwich**, Stone walls
187, **Scarborough**, Stone walls
188, **Shaftesbury**, Earthworks
189, **Shrewsbury**, Stone walls
190, **Skelton**, Earthworks
191, **Skipsea**, Earthworks
192, **Southampton**, Stone walls
193, **Southwold**, Stone walls?
194, **St Albans**, Earthworks
195, **Stafford**, Stone walls
196, **Staines**, Earthworks?
197, **Stamford**, Stone walls
198, **Stockport**, Stone walls
199, **Stow-on-the-Wold**, Earthworks?
200, **Swavesey**, Earthworks
201, **Tadcaster**, Earthworks
202, **Tamworth**, Earthworks
203, **Taunton**, Earthworks
204, **Teignmouth**, Stone walls?
205, **Tetbury**, Earthworks?
206, **Tewkesbury**, Gates
207, **Thetford**, Earthworks
208, **Thirsk**, Earthworks
209, **Tickhill**, Earthworks?
210, **Tilbury**, Earthworks?
211, **Tonbridge**, Stone walls
212, **Totnes**, Stone walls
213, **Trematon**, Earthworks?
214, **Trowbridge**, Earthworks
215, **Tutbury**, Earthworks
216, **Wallingford**, Stone walls
217, **Wareham**, Earthworks
218, **Warkworth**, Stone walls
219, **Warwick**, Stone walls
220, **Wells**, Stone walls?
221, **Whitchurch**, Earthworks
222, **Wigmore**, Earthworks
223, **Wilton**, Stone walls
224, **Winchcomb**, Earthworks
225, **Winchester**, Stone walls
226, **Witham**, Earthworks?
227, **Woodstock**, Stone walls?
228, **Worcester**, Stone walls
229, **Yarmouth**, Gates
230, **York**, Stone walls

Fig. 1.2: List of fortified medieval towns depicted on fig. 1.1.

TOWN DEFENCES: KEY TRENDS

Evidence for the existence of town defences in the period *c.* 1050-1550 has been recorded for 230 places in England and Wales (Scotland and Ireland had their own distinctive traditions of urban defence which are treated elsewhere)[8]. Existing published inventories of defended towns exhibit wildly differing estimates of the total number of fortified towns, demonstrating a progressive increase in recognised examples as fresh evidence emerges but also variations depending on where the threshold of what constitutes 'urbanism' and 'defence' is drawn[9]. For the purpose of this research, settlements provided with gated streets and those with earthwork circuits are included, though it should be noted that a continuum existed between a boundary ditch and a genuinely defensive perimeter earthwork; indeed, excavation has shown the evolution from the former to the latter on the same site, as at Hartlepool in the 14th century[10]. In addition, only those settlements recognised as towns and/or boroughs are included; the evidence for defended villages – the vast majority contained within castle baileys – is summarised

elsewhere[11], though again the division is blurred, not least as some such sites doubtless represent plantations with urban 'potential'. The list of places inevitably includes a number of 'possible' candidates (though attempts have been made to minimise these), for instance where documentary sources imply an intention to establish defences, but no physical or other evidence has come to light confirming that these initiatives were realised, as at Bangor, Holt, Ilfracombe and Penrith, for instance. The origins of these fortified places are complex and lie largely beyond the scope of this paper, though it is important to note that the urbanised nature of England in the late 11th century relative to the non-urban character of the Welsh landscape explains some key differences in the distribution and nature of town defences in the subsequent period. Thus the vast

---

8. For Ireland see THOMAS 1992; for Scotland see WALLACE *et al.* 2004; CREIGHTON & HIGHAM 2005, 75-78
9. TURNER 1970; BARLEY 1975; KING 1983; BOND 1987
10. DANIELS 1986

11. BOND 2001; CREIGHTON 2004

		England	Wales	Total
a. Number of fortified towns	*Definite*	144	38	**182**
	Possible	31	17	**48**
	Total	175	55	**230**
b. Date of first defences	*Roman*	19	2	**21**
	Early medieval	44	0	**44**
	11th century	12	3	**15**
	12th century	40	13	**53**
	13th century	25	30	**55**
	14th century	17	3	**20**
	15th century	8	2	**10**
	16th century	4	0	**4**
	Unknown	6	2	**8**
c. Construction type	*Masonry circuit*	85	27	**112**
	Earthwork circuit	81	25	**106**
	Unknown form	-	3	**3**
	Gates only	9	-	**9**
d. Expansion of circuit	*Circuit not extended*	143	48	**191**
	Extension to circuit	30	6	**36**
	Contraction to circuit	2	1	**3**
e. Presence/absence of castle	*No castle*	37	1	**38**
	Presence of a castle	138	54	**192**
f. Shrinkage and desertion	*Evidence of desertion*	12	5	**17**
	Evidence of shrinkage	8	12	**20**

Fig. 2: Fortified medieval towns in England and Wales: key characteristics.

majority of fortified towns in Wales were seigneurial plantations or nascent castle-towns, while in England major defended urban centres tended to retain their position near the top of the settlement hierarchy after the Norman Conquest of 1066. The distribution of these places is depicted in Fig 1.1, they are listed by name in Fig. 1.2 and their key characteristics summarised in Fig. 2. The following discussion is based on these sources.

Town defences and the urban hierarchy

The fortified towns of the post-Conquest period were very unevenly distributed within the urban hierarchy. Put simply, there is no direct correlation between the importance or size of a place and the existence of defences, nor indeed their scale or the level of investment in them. For instance, of Britain's 24 major regional centres at the end of the 14th century, places such as Beverley, Boston, Cambridge and Salisbury were embraced within ditches or earthworks only, while at towns such as Bury St Edmunds and [King's] Lynn, wall-building initiatives were left half complete[12]. The example of Beverley is instructive. Although it was an important ecclesiastical borough representing the eleventh richest town in England at this time, Beverley's 'defences' never developed beyond an irregular earthwork circuit (the 'Bar Dyke') augmented with gates or bars on its main entrances[13]. Recent excavation has confirmed a 12th-century origin for the feature but shown it to have had little genuinely defensive character, the ditch being flat-bottomed and, along with the internal bank, having the appearance of a jurisdictional work that was sporadically maintained and disused as early as the 14th century, notably

before the town's gates were built in brick[14]. In a significant minority of cases, the defences of major towns went out of use entirely in the immediate post-Conquest period, including important places such as Bedford, Hertford and Huntingdon, all county towns possessing earthwork circuits within which Norman castles were imposed, but which were never renewed in stone.

At the summit of Britain's urban hierarchy, meanwhile, London was exceptional as a major European medieval city in that its circuit was never enlarged to take in any of its burgeoning suburbs, the only extension to the Roman circuit of 132 hectares being a small alteration on the west side of the city to take in a monastic precinct in the 1270s[15]. Given the systematic demolition of London's riverside wall in the 11th century, the settlement was arguably less defensible in the later medieval period than before and, despite the city's increasing political independence, its identity and growth never found physical expression in the enlargement of its ancient enceinte.

Conversely, there was no 'cut off' point of size or importance beneath which fortified towns and boroughs are absent. Indeed, it is striking how far down the urban hierarchy we find enclosed towns and boroughs, especially those numerous tiny castle-dependent units exemplified by sites such as Richard's Castle, Castle Carlton and Kenfig. It is questionable, however, whether such defences represented 'town' walls as opposed to what were effectively extensions of the jurisdiction of the castles to which they were appended, and hence 'seigneurial' enclosures. At the Herefordshire village of Longtown, for example, topographical and geophysical survey has shown that, in common with many border boroughs, an embanked rectangular enclosure of 1.2 hectares appended to the Norman castle formed an initial 'nucleation point' for the borough in the 12th century, which subsequently expanded and spilled beyond the defences, having some 100 burgesses by 1310[16]. Other fortified towns failed outright or dwindled away, however. Indeed, the rate of failure is instructive: in Wales, a defended town or borough was actually more likely to fail than one that was unenclosed (in England, the reverse was true), largely as so many were castle-dependent nuclei that were otherwise unsustainable.

And, if it is significant which places *were* walled, it is equally significant which *were not*. It was certainly not the case that boroughs with the most powerful patrons all had defences: significant or strategic royal plantations at Liverpool, Windsor and Queenborough, for instance, remained unenclosed and even more notable is the strong tendency for ecclesiastical boroughs to lack walls. Places such as Ely and Reading remained unenclosed, for instance, while at Lichfield and St Albans towns were embanked or ditched but not walled, and ecclesiastical lordship is almost certainly one of the prime reasons why

---

12. KERMODE 2000, 442-3

13. MILLER *et al.* 1982, 39-45

14. HUMBER ARCHAEOLOGY 2003

15. BARRON 1989

16. RCHME 2003

Beverley failed to develop formal defences. Nor was the distribution of defended towns in space related in any simple way to levels of external threat. For instance, despite the French threat against the south coast that inspired many murage grants and urban fortifications in the second half of the 14th century, the Isle of Wight's three 'new towns' did not receive defences; similarly, important towns on the border with Scotland, such as Barnard Castle, Hexham and Morpeth were always unenclosed.

The best estimate for the number of towns (including boroughs with some 'urban' character) known to have existed in England is 719; for Wales the figure is 105[17]. While not all coexisted, what is clear is that no more than one quarter of these places in England possessed fortifications at some stage (24%); the figure for Wales is a little over half (52%), and if 'possible' fortifications are excluded the figures drop to 20% and 36% respectively. Viewed over a longer timescale, this situation is a reversal from the Roman period, where the level of urban fortification in England and Wales was higher than elsewhere in the Empire[18].

In Ireland, well over half of all medieval towns were defended[19]. In France, the proportion of walled towns was perhaps broadly comparable with England until the mid 14th century while, similarly, many of the most important defended communities retained circuits from the Roman period; however, a subsequent burst of wall-building and a renewed frenzy of activity during the wars of religion ensured a sharply divergent tradition of urban defence[20]. In Germany, the proportion of walled medieval cities is estimated at 41%, a figure which excludes those provided only with ramparts or palisades[21]. Indeed, the low incidence of town walls in England is such that a recent study of urban settlements in medieval East Anglia by a German scholar was titled *Städte ohne Mauren* or, 'towns without walls'[22]. Overall, it seems, relative stability and a combination of strong royal interest in major towns and the restraining influence of other urban lords were prime factors ensuring that the occurrence of walled places in England and Wales was remarkably low relative to much of western Europe.

The construction of defences

Rather than constituting linear barriers as sometimes assumed, town defences often comprised multi-layered 'belts' of features including ditches, earthworks and perhaps intra-mural streets: at places such as Gloucester and Lincoln, for example, wooden bars lying well in front of town gates actually marked the city limits, rather than walls themselves. A significant minority of fortified towns, meanwhile, featured gated streets but no enclosing works in a manner more typical of Scottish burghs, as at Banbury, Bewdley and Tewkesbury. Indeed, of the total sample of fortified towns, those possessing complete masonry circuits were actually in the minority, and nor were earthwork circuits necessarily indicative of lowly status. Archaeology, in particular, is adding to the number of recognised earthwork circuits, as three contrasting examples demonstrate. At the Rutland market town of Oakham, salvage excavation in 1994 revealed a large defensive ditch forming part of a hitherto unknown medieval earthwork circuit linking the late medieval stone gates known to have existed from place-name and cartographic evidence[23]. At Tenby, detailed structural recording of the town wall in 1993 has demonstrated that the masonry enceinte of the mid 14th century perpetuated the line of a mid 13th-century earth and timber circuit, while the defensive system in its later form was itself a hybrid of masonry and earthwork technologies[24]. Finally, at Abergavenny, excavations in 2001 sectioned a large V-shaped town ditch representing part of a Norman circuit linked to the castle and defining a far smaller perimeter than its well documented Edwardian masonry successor[25].

A more common characteristic of English and Welsh medieval town walls than we might imagine was their frequently poor construction: At Hastings, Pembroke and Southampton, for instance, excavated sections or structural recording has shown stretches of medieval town walls to be less than 0.8 m in thickness[26]. Elsewhere, planned masonry enceintes were never fully realised and gaps plugged with stretches of earth and timber, as at Scarborough, Stafford and [King's] Lynn, while at Bridgwater parts of the circuit were formed by the walls of houses, according to the 16th-century antiquarian John Leland. Refurbishments to monumental Roman circuits, meanwhile, might actually reduce the defensibility of towns; at Winchester, for instance, rebuilding of the city wall in the 13th century consisted of re-facing the core-work, so that the feature was thinner and weaker than its Roman counterpart[27]. And while at county towns such as Hereford, Norwich, Nottingham and Northampton, early medieval circuits were replaced by new perimeters taking in far larger areas, at other places antique walled circuits on unchanged lines remained core defensive features: at Canterbury and Winchester, for instance, extramural 'overspill' settlements were embraced within ditches only. At Lincoln vast suburbs on all four sides of the Roman circuit were enclosed by earthwork circuits and discontinuous stretches of walling and at Chichester and Exeter, Roman circuits persisted on unaltered lines through the middle ages.

17. DYER 2000, 507-8
18. PALLISER *et al.* 2000, 172
19. THOMAS 1993
20. WOLFE 2000
21. TRACY 2000
22. BRODT 1997

23. JONES 1995; CREIGHTON 1999
24. GARFI 1993, 63; see also THOMAS 1993
25. CLARKE & BRAY 2003
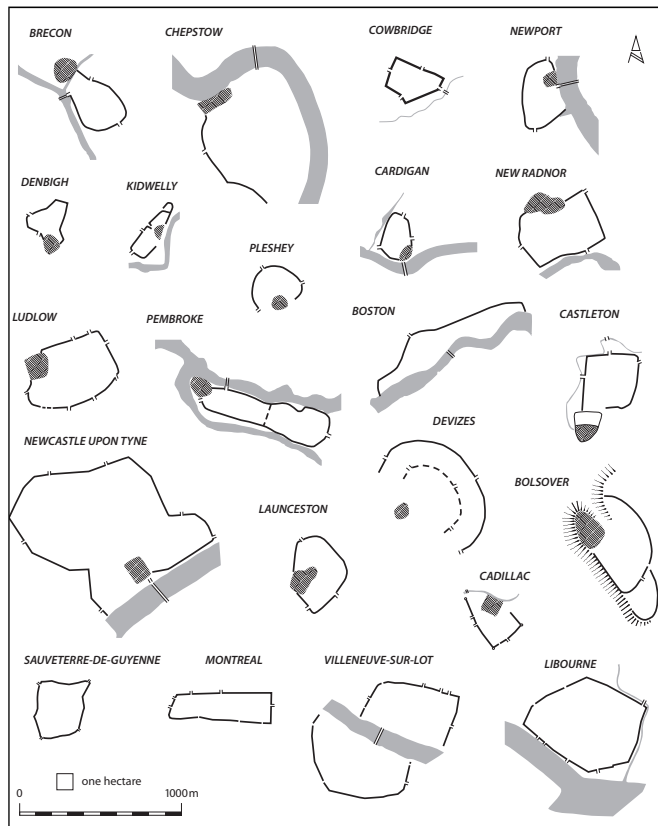26. CREIGHTON and HIGHAM 2005, 156-7
27. CUNLIFFE 1962, 69

Fig. 3: A sample of plans of defensive circuits around towns founded from the 11th century onwards in England, Wales and southwest France.

The topographies of defences

The plans featured in Fig. 3 give a representative idea of the scale and topographies of those circuits originating from the 11th century onwards. These topographies are clearly heterogeneous and readily identifiable 'plan types' are not apparent for two reasons. First, in a high proportion of cases circuits are clearly keyed into natural topography. In many cases town defences formed incomplete enclosures: at the simplest level, they might comprise linear earthworks cutting off one end of a ridge (e.g. Bridport; Downend; St Clears) or even a steep-sided valley (e.g. Hastings). Partial circuits enclosing loops against rivers are also numerous (e.g. Boston; Llandovery; Newcastle Emlyn; Rhuddlan I) while elsewhere the formats of complete perimeters were dictated largely or in part by natural eminences (e.g. Montgomery; Pembroke), both categories being especially common in Wales. Second, there is remarkably little evidence that circuits were planned contemporary with the creation of town plans. In the case of 'new towns' the incidence of fortification is actually far lower than for the total sample of medieval towns and where these places were enclosed, it was invariably in the form of an enclosure appended to a seigneurial castle as opposed to a genuinely communal enterprise. Circuits emanating from castle nuclei might take a form broadly dictated by natural topography (for instance, against a river, as at

Newport, along a ridge, as at Bolsover, or a hill-top, as at Denbigh), resemble large oval-shaped outer baileys (e.g. Launceston; Devizes; Tonbridge; Trowbridge), or rectangular or square enclosures (e.g. Castle Acre; Castle Rising; Castleton; Farnham). Castles were more or less omnipresent in the walled towns of Wales, invariably forming the nucleus of growth and an 'anchor' for the circuit. Of the post-Conquest circuits in England, only a small minority lacked castles, and these places mainly gained their defences at a relatively late date, as at Boston, Brighton, Melcombe Regis, Poole and Sandwich. In other cases defensive circuits embraced settlements that had grown up more or less organically: this explains, for instance, the convoluted circuits of places such as Alnwick and Newcastle. Nowhere, however, is this more apparent than Coventry, where an 85 hectare walled circuit on a tortuous line was completed after an unprecedented period of more than 200 years following the project's commencement in the late 1320s[28]. In such cases the construction of a new circuit might cut across settlements or property: the 13th-century wall of Southampton, for instance, preserves physical evidence of this in a truncated series of merchant's houses, while at Norwich the wall built from the 1290s cut through the prior's land in the Pockthorpe area to the north and excluded the hamlet of Heigham to the west[29].

Finally, it should be noted that the size of a circuit was not necessarily indicative of population size, as three examples highlight. At Cowbridge, the 5.5 hectare circuit enclosed no more than one third of the burgage plots in existence at the town's peak in 1300; conversely, barely more than one third of the enclosed area of late medieval Chepstow, taking in a huge arc against the River Wye and enclosing some 45 hectares, was filled with development. Norwich's town wall of the 13th century formed a curving line 3.8 km long against the River Wensum to encompass the largest defended area in Britain (388 hectares), but the intra-mural zone included large areas of gardens and fields as well as plots. Other towns whose circuits embraced open areas include New Radnor, Sandwich, Usk and [King's] Lynn, in these cases apparently indicating urban ambition never fully realised.

The meanings of defences

As well as mapping fortified towns, the research has highlighted a number of broader areas in which our overall understanding of the functions and, indeed, meanings of town defences might be re-assessed. Two areas can be singled out in particular.

First, we need to question whether *town* walls were exactly that. Numerous circuits radiated from castle nuclei and were always at least partly seigneurial in character. At places such as Lincoln and Durham, 'town' walls essentially defined high-status zones while commercial districts and residential suburbs

---

28. GOODER *et al*. 1966
29. CAMPBELL 1974, 10-11

were enclosed in partial and piecemeal fashion; elsewhere ecclesiastical precincts took up large intra-mural zones and effectively privatised stretches of circuits. We should also remember that while the image and iconography of the town wall presented a unified front, these monuments actually disguised factions and division within urban society. For instance, the medieval town seals of London and Oxford show castles and town walls as one in emulation of an 'ideal city' image, while panels above town gates frequently proclaimed partnerships between urban 'stakeholders' including the crown, ecclesiastical authorities or the corporation, sometimes leant weight by legendary figures associated with foundation 'myths' as at Bristol and Bath[30]. Yet walls were more contested features within townscapes than we might imagine, and we might better recognise that as well as embracing communities, town walls excluded, disadvantaged or disenfranchised others. An anecdotal snippet of documentary evidence illustrates one way in which town walls might not always have represented the symbols of universal advantage and privilege we might assume them to have been. In Swansea, Edward III licensed the burgesses of Swansea with the right to levy murage on 12th February 1338, following a request from the town's lord, John of Mowbray, yet the grant was cancelled four months later following violent protest by those whose exemption from tax had been affected[31]. This 'alternative' history or archaeology of walls as arenas for conflict *within* urban society remains to be written.

Second, in seeking explanation for the town wall phenomenon in the middle ages, while it might seem tempting to polarise interpretation of their presumed 'military' and 'social/symbolic' functions, it is perhaps more meaningful to accept that several different 'histories' of urban defence co-exist. Thus, at a broad level the chronology of walling and the distribution of fortified places may well reflect upon and inform us about episodes of insecurity, conquest or colonisation. Yet at another level town walls tell us of the ambitions of communities who valued defences for reasons beyond the utilitarian; at another, however, they were features within townscapes used on a day-to-day basis, as documentary sources make clear, for a strikingly wide array of things, mundane and otherwise. Thus, numerous town ditches were also mill-races (Hereford and Conwy) and/or fishponds (Oxford and York); gatehouses contained private residences (London, Aldgate), guildhalls (Lincoln, Stonebow), chapels (Barnstaple, North Gate) and supported churches above (Canterbury, Newingate, North Gate, Riding Gate and West Gate) and prisons below (Kidwelly, South Gate); towers housed hermits (Winchester); wall-walks were valued by their citizens as promenades (Northampton), walls as quarries and the foundations of houses (Shrewsbury), town banks and extra-mural strips as spaces for drying cloth (Exeter), pasturing animals (Norwich) and, of course, dumping grounds (everywhere).
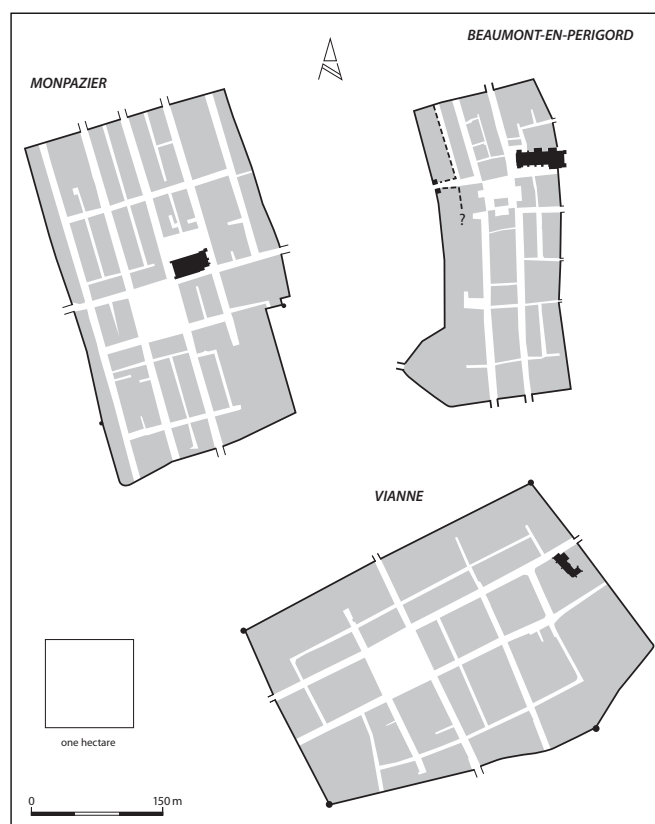

Fig. 4: Plans of fortified bastides in 'English' Gascony: Beaumont-en-Perigord, Monpazier and Vianne (based on 19th-century cadastral maps).

Case Study: Bastides

The bastide towns of the late 13th and early 14th centuries, so characteristic of medieval south-west France and with a small and significant group of equivalents in England and Wales, have been exhaustively studied in terms of their town plans and the chronologically of their plantation. With respect to the evidence in 'English' Gascony, Trabut-Cusac's devastating critique of militaristic theories of bastide foundation and planning has drawn together compelling evidence both for a lack of references to defensive provision in foundation charters and for many bastides developing defences as a secondary measure, as indicated by petitions from towns to Edward II and Edward II requesting financial assistance with wall-building[32]. Overall, the proportion of Gascon plantations provided with defences has been estimated at 36%, while striking also is the virtual absence of castles[33]. The three examples illustrated in Fig. 4 explore these issues. Frequently cited as the 'quintessential' English bastide, Monpazier (founded 1284) was actually atypical in the possession of

30. WHEATLEY 2004, 65-70
31. CAL PAT ROLLS 1338-40, 6; see also COULSON 2003, 284

32. TRABUT CUSSAC 1954; for earlier views see HIGOUNET 1948; ST BLANQUAT 1949
33. BERESFORD 1967, 14-51, 183; for defences in general see SALCH 1978 and for synthesis LAURET et al. 1988

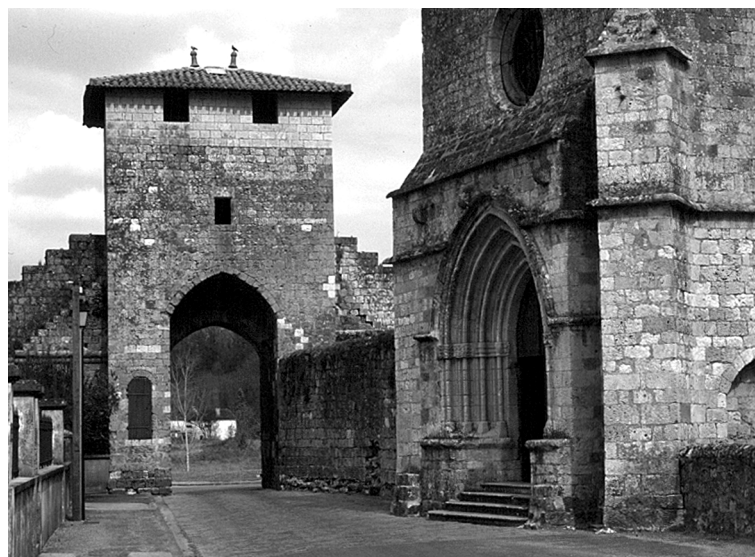*Fig. 5: The medieval town defences of Vianne, showing the Porte Notre Dame on the east side
of the circuit and the 12th-century church immediately inside the perimeter (photograph: O. Creighton).*

defences from its establishment and, even more so in that these followed the town's geometric layout, with its many gates a clear sign that defence should not compromise the town's commercial functions[34]. Some reticence on behalf of the burgesses is evident in Edward I's threat in 1289 to fine those who had failed to take up their plots, the funds being diverted to support work on the (unfinished) wall[35]. The circuit's somewhat austere 'military architecture' is mirrored at another one of the very few English bastides equipped with walls, Vianne (1284) (Fig. 5). The bastide was established on the site of an extant village and intended initially as an open (although ditched) site, gaining its walls a generation later in the 1320s[36]. Beaumont (1272) remained unfortified even longer after its foundation; not until 1305 was a petition to erect walls in honour of the king made, and in 1320 royal help was requested in putting up gates[37]. Other clearly documented examples of English bastides (or those coming under English control) that were tardy in erecting defences well into the 14th century include Castilliones, Libourne and Ste Foy La Grande; at places such as Sauveterre-de-Guyenne and Villeréal (which was ditched not walled), meanwhile, the secondary addition of defences is apparent in the orientation of their perimeters at odds with the gridded street pattern.

The famous 'new' towns of Edward I in North Wales are frequently seen as representing the 'apogee' of town and castle plantation[38]. Yet despite the clear twinned nature of these castle-town foundations, the massive investment of royal resources behind them, and their explicitly colonial context, it is notable

that urban defences were not ubiquitous. A summary of the defences of these ten plantations is instructive. At Conwy (founded 1283), work on the walled enceinte was only completed following a grant of murage in 1305, and the burgesses petitioned for another in 1313[39]. At Caernarfon (1283), detailed metrological analysis of the town plan shows the wall to have cut across the pattern of burgage plots, suggesting a change of plan or, at least that the circuit and pattern of plots were not conceived as one, as usually assumed[40]. It should also not escape attention that the scale and expense of these masonry 'urban' defences – provided at only two of the ten Edwardian boroughs in North Wales – was out of all proportion to their 'urban' fortunes and commercial success. Thus, despite the political and symbolic importance of these two places, where the constables of the royal castles were also *ex officio* mayors of the walled English boroughs, their economies remained relatively undeveloped and highly specialised. Elsewhere in Wales, Edward's boroughs of Beaumaris (1295) and Ruthin (1282) were not walled until the 15th century; Criccieth (1284), Harlech (1283) and Newborough (1303) were always un-enclosed; and at Bere (1284) a borough foundation squeezed into the castle bailey withered away or was aborted[41]. The two remaining boroughs, Flint (1277) and Rhuddlan (1278), were enclosed not with walls but, as excavation has shown, with earthwork perimeters comprising a shallow flat-bottomed ditch between two low banks (Fig. 6), giving the appearance of jurisdictional rather than military works, and it is far from certain that they were equipped with palisades[42].

---

34. Pons 1998
35. Beresford 1967, 584
36. Higounet 1984, 22-26
37. Trabut Cussac 1954, 99-100; Beresford 1967, 33-34
38. Reynolds 1977, 129

39. Taylor 1974, 350
40. I am grateful to K. Lilley for this information; see also Lilley *et al.* forthcoming
41. Beresford 1967, 3-51
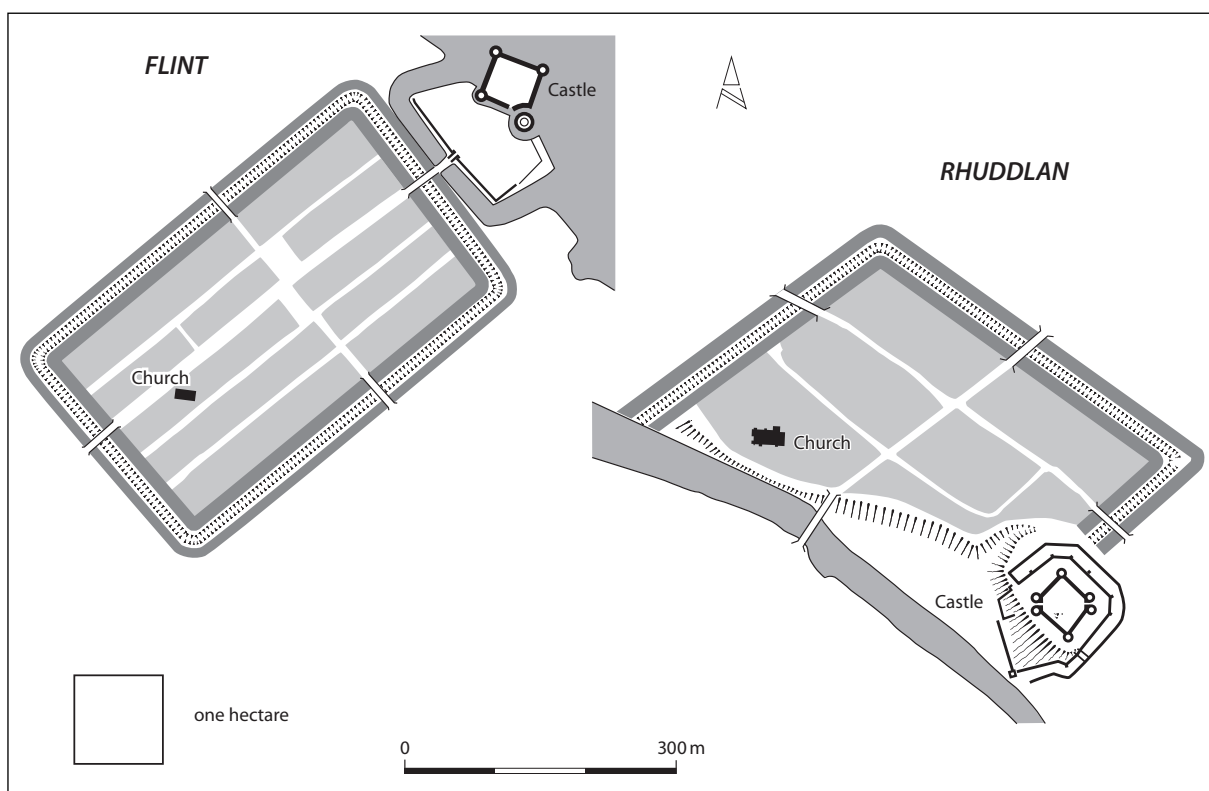42. Cherry 1971, 192; Quinnell and Blockley 1994, 84-91

Fig. 6: Plans of the Edwardian boroughs of Flint and Rhuddlan,
showing concentric earthwork defences around, and fully integrated with, the gridded town plans.

At Berwick-upon-Tweed, town defences were clearly integral with the new town founded in 1296. Initial work on a town ditch started four days after the place's capture and was followed swiftly by a stone wall that was complete when the burgesses took the defences into their own hands in 1317[43], although this was utterly ineffective in the face of the Scottish attack the following year. Berwick's explicitly military context explains the decision to enclose from the outset, but Edward I's other planted towns in England show a different story. A particularly instructive case is that of New Winchelsea (Figs 7 and 8), founded as a replacement for the inundated walled town of Old Winchelsea in the 1280s and inhabited from 1292[44]. The morphological similarity between this urban townscape as originally conceived and the English bastides of south-west France has been long established[45]; it is only recently, however, that the town-plan has been exposed to detailed survey and the documentary data synthesised[46]. It is debatable whether the history of Winchelsea's defences is one of unfulfilled ambition or complacency; what is sure is that an integrated defensive circuit was never realised. Murage grants are recorded after the plantation in 1295 (five years) and 1321

(seven years)[47], but when the French raided in the late 14th century there was no wall but a palisade of questionable defensive value[48], though the town had four stone gates. In 1415, the unusual step of reducing the enclosed area to the twenty 'quarters' in the north-east part of the town was taken, although the only stretch built was a length of bastioned walling on the east side before the enterprise was abandoned. At Kingston-upon-Hull, meanwhile, the first embanked and ditched defences of the Edwardian borough were built some 25 years after its foundation in 1293[49], and the walling was a prolonged venture initiated in the 1330s but incomplete until 1409[50].

Overall, therefore, despite the fact that these plantations arguably represented the highpoint of medieval 'new' town foundation, the available evidence suggests that walled circuits were in no way an essential or consistent element of town planning. Those places that did received defences are the exception rather than the rule, and their possession was more an index of political importance than commercial success. Put simply, urbanism was not as synonymous with defence as we might assume.

43. CAL PAT ROLLS 1313-1317, 671; see also Brown *et al.* 1963, 563-566
44. BERESFORD 1967, 14-28
45. CHAMBERS 1937; HOMAN 1940
46. MARTIN & MARTIN 2002a; 2002b

47. CAL PAT ROLLS 1266-72, 357; 1292-1301, 147
48. CAL CHART ROLLS iii, 147
49. CAL PAT ROLLS 1321-24, 7; see also EVANS 1994
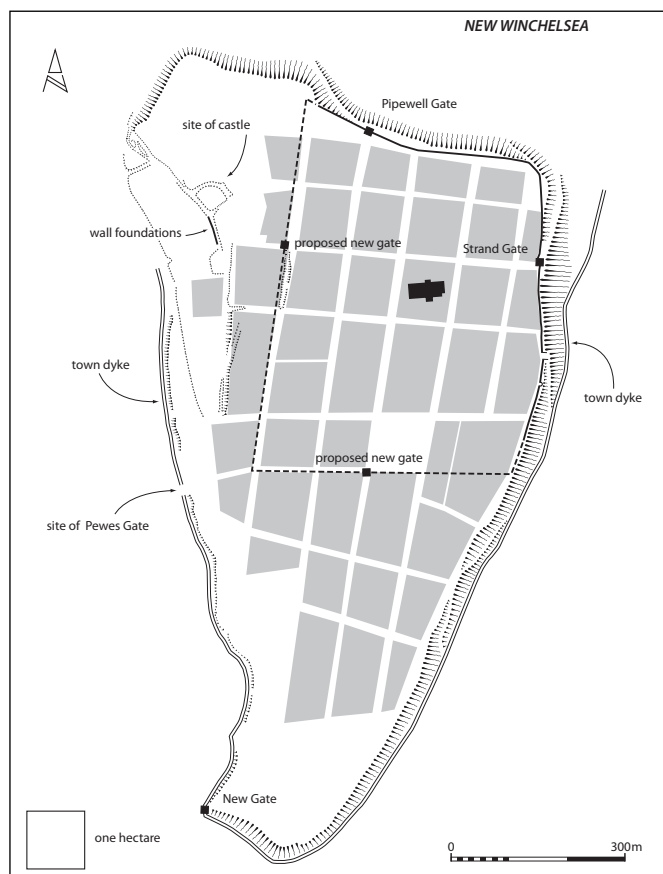50. EVANS 1997, 37-39

Fig. 7: Plan of Winchelsea, showing the gridded street plan of the bastide and two lines of medieval defences, the outer representing the circuit as conceived at the town's foundation in the late 13th century, and the inner line a projected scheme to rebuild the defences on a smaller scale in the 15th century.

Fig. 8: The defences of Winchelsea, East Sussex, showing the line of the original (and outer) earthwork circuit on the north-west side of the bastide. (photograph: O. Creighton).

Conclusions

This paper has highlighted some general trends that underline the distinctive qualities of English and Welsh urban defences relative to the wider European scene. It is clear that town walls have much to tell us not only about fortification; far from existing solely in the realm of 'military architecture', town walls tell us much about the social and economic lives of towns and the identities of communities. In particular, study of the defences of towns can shed light on important questions concerning power, independence and division within towns and townscapes, and illuminate further the strong linkages between royal power and urbanism so characteristic of the British scene.

If the research potential of town walls is to be developed further, however, it is essential both that town defences are not seen as a mere footnote to the study of castles and that their study becomes increasingly integrated within the wider field of castellology as well as within medieval archaeology and urban study generally. Indeed, this paper has barely touched on comparison of the architectural form of castle and town defences, and detailed study would doubtless show how these reflect hierarchies of status and importance uniting and/or dividing lords and communities. It is encouraging that some recent works on castles in their wider contexts have paid attention to urban defences and gone some way towards breaking down what is essentially a false distinction between 'private' and 'public/communal' defence[51]. Much more remains to be done, however, and further contextual studies are urgently required.

---

51. COULSON 2003; WHEATLEY 2004; for archaeology see KENYON 1990; for discussion of settlements within castle baileys see also CREIGHTON 2004

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BARLEY, M.W.,
1976, Town defences in England and Wales after 1066. In: BARLEY, M.W. (ed.), The Plans and Topography of Medieval Towns in England and Wales, London, 57-71.

BARRON, C.,
1989, The late Middle Ages: 1270-1520. In: LOBEL, M.D. (ed.) The City of London from Prehistoric Times to c. 1520 (The British Atlas of Historic Towns, Vol. III), Oxford, 34-56.

BERESFORD, M.W.,
1967, New Towns of the Middle Ages, London.

BOND, J.,
1987, Anglo-Saxon and medieval defences. In: SCHOFIELD, J. & LEECH, R. (eds), Urban Archaeology in Britain, London, 92-115.
2001, Earthen castles, outer enclosures and the earthworks at Ascott d'Oilly Castle, Oxfordshire. In: Oxoniensia 66, 43-69.

BRODT, B.,
1997, Städte ohne Mauern: Stadtentwicklung in East Anglia im 14. Jahrhundert, Paderborn.

BROWN, R.A., COLVIN, H.M. & TAYLOR, A.J.,
1963, The History of the King's Works, Volumes I and II: The Middle Ages, London.

CAMPBELL, J.,
1974, Norwich. In: LOBEL, M.D. (ed.), Historic Towns: Maps and Plans of Towns and Cities in the British Isles, with Historical Commentaries, from Earliest Times to 1800, London, 1-25.

CHERRY, J.,
1971, Medieval Britain in 1971. In: Medieval Archaeology 16, 171-212.

CLARKE, S. & BRAY, J.,
2003, The Norman town defences of Abergavenny. In: Medieval Archaeology 47, 186-189.

COULSON, C.,
1995, Battlements and the bourgeoisie: municipal status and the apparatus of urban defence in later-medieval England. In: CHURCH, S. and HARVEY, R. (eds), Medieval Knighthood 5, 119-195.
2003, Castles in Medieval Society. Fortresses in England, France, and Ireland in the Central Middle Ages, Oxford.

CREIGHTON, O.H.,
1999, Early castles in the medieval landscape of Rutland. In: Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society 73, 19-33.
2002, Castles and Landscapes, London and New York.
2004, 'The Rich Man in His Castle, the Poor Man at His Gate': Castle Baileys and Medieval Settlements in England. In: Château Gaillard 21, 25-36.

CREIGHTON O.H. & HIGHAM, R.A.,
2005, Medieval Town Walls: An Archaeology and Social History of Urban Defence, Stroud.

CUNLIFFE, B.
1962: The Winchester city wall. Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society 22, Part 2, 51-81.

DANIELS, R.,
1986, The medieval defences of Hartlepool. In: Durham Archaeological Journal 2, 63-72.

DYER, C.,
2000, Small towns 1270-1540. In: PALLISER, D.M. (ed.), The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Cambridge, 505-537.

EVANS, D.H.,
1994: Excavations at the Beverley Gate, and Other Parts of the Town Defences of Kingston upon Hull (Unpublished Report in Humberside SMR), Hull.
1997: Archaeological work in the medieval port of Kingston-upon-Hull. In: Lübecker Kolloquium sur Stadtarchäologie im Hanseraum 1, 25-49.

GARFI, S.,
1993, Tenby Town Walls Archaeological Recording Project for Pembrokeshire District Council and Cadw, Aberystwyth.

GOODER, E., WOODFIELD, C. and CHAPLIN, R.,
1966, The walls of Coventry. In: Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society 81, 88-138.

HIGOUNET, C.,
1948, Bastides et frontièrs. In: Le Moyen .Age 54, 113-121
1984, Vianne, Lot-et-Garonne, Une Bastide Fortifiée en Agenais, Villefranche-de-Rouergue.

HUMBER ARCHAEOLOGY,
2003, An Archaeological Evaluation at Kitchen Lane, Beverley, East Rising of Yorkshire Report No. 146), Hull.

JONES, E.,
1995, An archaeological salvage excavation and watching-brief at South Street, Oakham. In: Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society 69, 118.

KENYON, J.R.,
1990, Medieval Fortifications, Leicester.

KERMODE, J.,
2000, The greater towns 1300-1540. In: PALLISER, D.M. (ed.), The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Cambridge, 441-464.

KING, D.J.C.,
1983: Castellarium Anglicanum, 2 Vols. London: Kraus.

LILLEY, K., LLOYD, C. and GRAHAM, C.,
forthcoming, Analysing and mapping medieval urban forms using GPS and GIS. In: Urban Morphology 9.

MARTIN, D. and MARTIN, B.,
2002a, An Extensive Survey Assessment of Winchelsea, East Sussex, London.

2002b, A Quarter-by-Quarter Analysis of Winchelsea, East Sussex, London.

MILLER, K. ROBINSON, J. ENGLISH, B. & HALL, I.,
1982, Beverley: An Archaeological and Architectural Study, London.

PALLISER, D.M. SLATER, T.R. & PATRICIA DENNISON, E.,
2000, The topography of towns 600-1300. In: PALLISER, D.M. (ed.), The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Cambridge, 153-186.

PERBELLINI, G. (ed.)
2000, The Town Walls in the Middle Ages: Les Enceintes Urbaines Au Moyen Âge, The Hague.

PONS, J.,
1998, Monpazier, Archéologie de la bastide. In: Les Cahiers de C.E.B. 4, 30-35.

QUINNELL, H. and BLOCKLEY, M.R.,
1994, Excavations at Rhuddlan, Clwyd 1969-73 Mesolithic to Medieval, London.

REYNOLDS, S.,
1977, An Introduction to the History of Medieval Towns, Oxford.

RCHME,
1972, An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the City of York, Volume II, The Defences, London.
2003, Longtown, Herefordshire, Survey Report (Archaeological Investigation Report Series AI/26/2003), Swindon.

ST BLANQUAT, O. DE,
1949, Comment se sont créés les bastides? In: Annales Histoire Sciences Sociales 4(3), 278-289.

SALCH, C.L.,
1978, Atlas des Villes et Villages Fortifiés en France (Moyen Age). Strasbourg.

STOYLE, M.J.,
2003, Circled with Stone: Exeter's City Walls, 1485-1660, Exeter.

TAYLOR, A.J.,
1974, The King's Works in Wales 1277-1330, London.

THOMAS, A.,
1992, The Walled Towns or Ireland (2 vols.), Dublin.

THOMAS, W.G.,
1993, The walls of Tenby. In: Archaeologia Cambrensis 142, 1-39.

TRABUT-CUSSAC, J-P.,
1954, Bastides ou forteresses? Les bastides de l'Aquitaine anglaise et les intentions de leurs fondateurs. In: Le Moyen Age 60, 81-135.

TRACY, J.D. (ed.),
2000, City Walls: The Urban Enceinte in Global Perspective, Cambridge.

TRACY, J.D.,
2000, To wall or not to wall: evidence from medieval Germany. In: TRACY, J.D. (ed.): City Walls: The Urban Enceinte in Global Perspective, Cambridge, 71-87.

TURNER, H.L.,
1970, Town Defences in England and Wales, London.

WALLACE, C. LAWSON, J.A. & REED, D.,
2004, "Ye toun salbe wallit and stankeit about, with ane substantious wall". Mural ideology in 16th-century Edinburgh and southern Scotland. In: History Scotland 4: 6, 35-42.

WHEATLEY, A.,
2004, The Idea of the castle in Medieval England, York.

WOLFE, M.,
2000, Walled towns during the French wars of religion. In: TRACY, J.D. (ed.): City Walls: The Urban Enceinte in Global Perspective, Cambridge, 317-348.

Résumé, Abstract, Zusammenfassung

« Les châteaux des communautés » :
les fortifications urbaines médiévales en Angleterre, au Pays de Galles et en Gascogne

Les fortifications urbaines médiévales représentent un domaine de recherche quelque peu négligé, malgré un travail de fond important et quelques études prépondérantes portant sur des villes étudiées individuellement. Cet article présente des données clés, issues d'un projet de recherche récent sur l'archéologie et l'histoire sociale des fortifications urbaines en Angleterre, au Pays de Galles et en Gascogne « anglaise » pendant la période 1050-1600. En assimilant les informations complémentaires de l'archéologie, de l'architecture, de documents historiques et de la topographie urbaine, puis en les considérant comme des témoignages d'une identité et de besoins commerciaux autant que de structures militaires, ce projet a l'ambition de réévaluer les fonctions et la signification de fortifications urbaines. Des thématiques spécifiques abordées dans l'article sont : le nombre de villes fortifiées et leur répartition au sein de l'hiérarchie urbaine ; la date ; la construction et la topographie des enceintes ; et la fonction de fortifications. Des bastides des XIIIe et XIVe siècles et leurs fortifications sont étudiées à travers une étude de cas qui aborde ces thèmes de près. En outre, l'étude suggère qu'il est désormais temps de reconsidérer un certain nombre d'idées sur les fortifications urbaines aujourd'hui communément admises – dont la notion selon laquelle elles représenteraient des attributs caractérisant les centres urbains et des fortifications « communales ».

'Castles of Communities' : Medieval Town Defences in England, Wales and Gascony

Medieval town defences represent a somewhat neglected area of research, despite important groundwork and some influential studies of individual fortified towns and cities. This paper presents some key data derived from a recent research project investigating the archaeology and social history of urban defences in England, Wales and 'English' Gascony in the period c. 1050-1500. Combining the evidence of archaeology, architecture, documents and urban topography, the project has aimed to re-evaluate the functions and significance of urban defences, examining them as expressions of identity and commercial need as well as military features. Particular themes addressed in the paper are : the number of fortified towns and their distribution within the urban hierarchy ; the date, construction and topographies of circuits ; and the functions of defences. Bastides of the thirteenth and fourteenth century and their defences are examined in a case study that explores these themes further. Overall, the evidence suggests that some commonly held ideas about town defences – including the notions that they represented defining features of urban settlements and 'communal' fortifications – are in urgent need of re-appraisal.

"Gemeindeburgen" - mittelalterliche Stadtbefestigungen in England, Wales und der Gascogne

Mittelalterliche Stadtbefestigungen sind ein etwas vernachlässigtes Forschungsgebiet, trotz bedeutender Grundlagenforschungen und beispielhafter Monographien. Dieser Aufsatz stellt Schlüsseldaten aus einem aktuellen Forschungsprojekt zur Archäologie und Sozialgeschichte der Stadtbefestigungen in England, Wales und der "englischen" Gascogne zwischen etwa 1050 und 1500 vor. Dieses Projekt verwertet schriftliche, archäologische, baugeschichtliche und stadttopographische Quellen. Sein Zweck ist es, Bedeutung und Funktionen der Stadtbefestigungen neuzubewerten - nicht nur als Wehranlagen, sondern auch als Handelsinfrastruktur und als Identitätsausdruck. Auf folgende Themen geht der Aufsatz besonders ein : die Zahl der befestigten Städte und ihre Verteilung in der Hierarchie der Zentralorte; Alter, Bauweise und Topographie der Ringmauern; die Zwecke der Befestigungswerke. Bastides des 13. u. 14. Jhs. und ihre Befestigungen werden in einer Fallstudie untersucht, die diese Themen vertieft. Darüber hinaus zeigt der Befund, daß manche überkommene Meinungen über Stadtbefestigungen dringend geprüft werden sollten; das gilt auch für die Idee, sie seien Gemeindebefestigungen und für den Stadtbegriff konstitutiv.