Aberystwyth town walls[1]

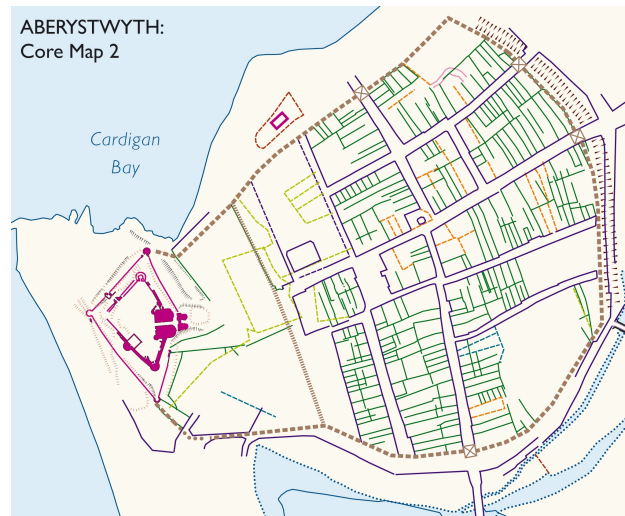Roger Boyle

December 2, 2020

Figure 1: The course of the town wall [3]. The original and current street plans are easily seen.

- *Grant that the town of Lanbadar shall be a free borough; and grant to the burgesses of the said borough, and their heirs, that they may enclose the town of Lanbadar with a ditch and wall.* [Edward I, December 28, 1277] [12]

- *Item he counts on carriage of stones and timber by ship for the works of the castle and vill of Llanbadarn, for making and repairing a fosse round the village and a pond, by the view and testimony of the said prior – £413 6s 5$\frac{1}{2}$d.* [1278] [13, p 11]

- *And on the works on the wall surrounding vill of Llanbadarn, £199 19s $\frac{1}{2}$d.* [1280] [13, p 33]

- *a market toun ons waullid* [1540] [9]

- *Part of the old wall of the town is remaining, but all the facing stones have been taken away.*

  A regular modern ravelin is advanced before the gateway, which was perhaps thrown up in the time of the Protectorship.

  It is certainly to be lamented that the antiquities in these and some other parts of the principality are not better preserved. How can the inhabitants be so negligent of their real interests? and why will they destroy the almost only inducement for strangers to visit this miserable coast? This rage for the destruction of Pagan remains is attributed to the zeal of the modern Methodists who abound in these parts. Perhaps this conjecture, ridiculous as it at first appears, may not be totally without foundation. For to what absurd and contemptible lengths has fanaticism been carried in all ages! [1775] [17]

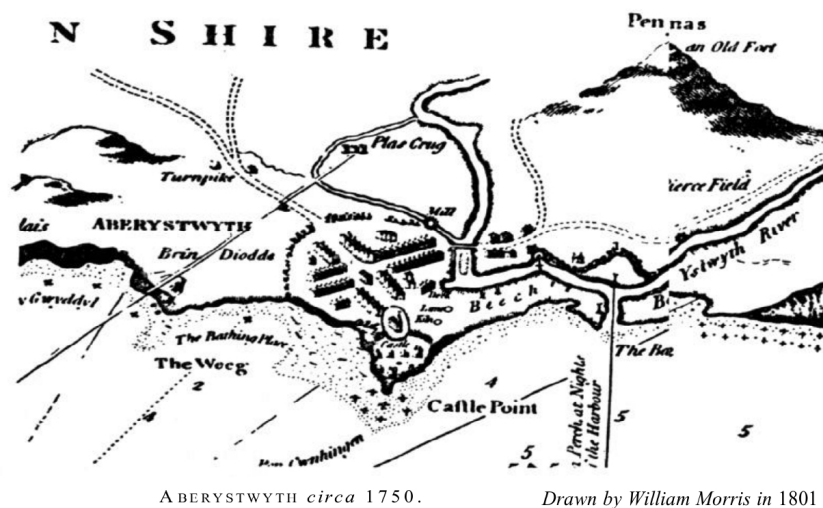[1] Available at: http://www.rogerdboyle.net/Terminalia/walls.pdf

Figure 2: A map of the town around 1750 [4].

- *It was formerly a fortified place, and still retains many ruins of a strong wall, and a large castle . . .* [1797] [2, p 43]

- *Formerly it was well walled, and defended by a castle.* [1798] [15, p 160]

- *It was formerly fortified with walls, some of which still remain, but as the stones are constantly taken for building, they will soon be no more.* [1803] [7, p 336]

Aberystwyth was an exercise in medieval new town planning [11], with the town boundary (wall) being determined at the same time that the fortifying castle was built (taking its name from the preceding castle beyond the Ystwyth, south of the rivers [14]). The town was (and is) a crossing of Great Darkgate street and Bridge Street/Pier street – when created they were of equal length, 1250ft.

While visible remains of the wall are all but disappeared, its course is largely easy to determine and it is simple to decide who is inside and who is outside. Trefechan was certainly outside, and the likes of Waunfawr nothing more than wilderness. The wall was very roughly elliptical, and quartered by Darkgate and the (dog-legged) Bridge Street/Pier Street at the carfax still very evident today.

Originally the walled town was for English/Norman inhabitants only and it was some time before Welsh were permitted [1]: the Welsh inhabited Trefechan ('Little Town').

The town planning was far sighted as the population and structure of the town did not extend beyond the wall until 1797 when a Baptist chapel was the first substantial construction outside on Baker Street, subsequently rebuilt in the late nineteenth century (smaller short-lived buildings appeared earlier in 1797 [10]).

The walls and gates were under some level of municipal protection until the middle eighteenth century, but thereafter there is increasing evidence of disrepair and raiding as a quarry [6].

Points of interest from Castle Point, travelling anti-clockwise:

1. Whether the wall included quay access is disputed.

Figure 3: A portion of Couling's 1809 map; while the course of the wall is clear all physical traces have gone. Courtesy of Ceredigion Archive Service, original held in the National Library of Wales.

2. A significant [South] gate was at Heol Y Bont. The date of the first bridge structure to Trefechan is unknown.

3. The wall stood at the top of the bank leading down from Mill Street; at the base ran the mill leat which re-used the fortifying outer ditch [5]. The Welsh name – Dan Dre – is a clue, "Under the town" [6].

4. Chalybeate Street, named to suggest 'health giving' waters with iron content: a spring was nearby. Behind the houses at the eastern end on the northern side (running from the bakery to the roundabout) the drop of the wall is evidenced by the rear entries being one floor *below* street level. This can be seen by going through the archway on Cambrian Place which lads to a rear courtyard.

5. The major town gate [Y Porth Mawr] was at Darkgate, and has been seen in impromptu excavations.

6. A secondary gate was at Eastgate, which was once called Little Darkgate.

7. The wall ran to the west (left as you ascend) of Baker Street, so the Bethel Baptist Chapel (first built in 1797) was outside.

8. It ran behind Crynfryn Row to the crest of the small cliff behind the Chinese takeaways, and thence along the rear boundary of Crynfryn Buildings, originally the boundary of Crynfryn House. It is suggested that some wall remnant is visible here [8].

9. It is uncertain whether there was a gate at Pier Street.

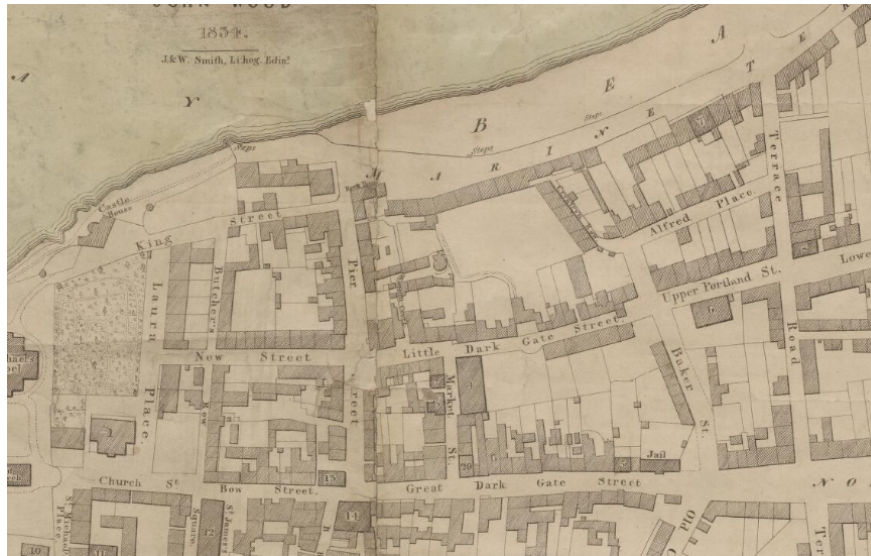10. . . . and then to King Street.

Figure 4: A portion of Wood's 1834 map; the town perimeter is now much less than clear. Original held in the National Library of Wales [16].

References

[1] Aberystwyth Council. Under the charters. http://www.aberystwyth.gov.uk/en/council/history-of-the-borough/under-the-charters, 2017.

[2] A Aikin. *Journal of a Tour through North Wales and part of Shropshire*. J Johnson, London, 1797.

[3] Archeology Data Service. http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/, 2017.

[4] H Carter. The town in its setting: the geographical approach. In M W Barley, editor, *The plans and topography of medieval towns in England and Wales*. Council for British Archaeology, 1976. CBA Research Report No 14.

[5] O Creighton and R Higham. *Medieval Town Walls: an Archaeology and Social History of Urban Defence*. Tempus, 2005.

[6] G E Evans. *Aberystwyth and its court leet*. Welsh Gazette, 1902.

[7] J E Evans. *Letters written during a tour through South Wales*. Baldwin, London, 1804.

[8] Kerry. Fisherman's cottage. https://www.airbnb.co.uk/rooms/14919024, 2017.

[9] J Leland. *The itinerary of John Leland in or about the years 1535-1543*. G Bell, 1907. ed. L Toulmin Smith.

[10] W J Lewis. Some aspects of the history of Aberyswyth. *Ceredigion*, 3(4), 1959.

[11] K D Lilley. The landscapes of Edward's new towns: Their planning and design. In D Williams and J Kenyon, editors, *The impact of Edwardian castles*, pages 99–113. Oxbow, 2009.

[12] H C M Lyte, editor. *Calendar of Charter Rolls*, volume 2. HM Stationery Office, 1906.

[13] Myvanwy Rhys, editor. *Ministers' Accounts for West Wales 1277-1306*. Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1936.

[14] C J Spurgeon. The castle and borough to 1649. In I G Jones, editor, *Aberystwyth, 1277-1977 : eight lectures to celebrate the seventh centenary of the foundation of the borough*, pages 28–45. Gomer Press, 1977.

[15] Richard Warner. *A Second Walk Through Wales*. Cruttwell, Bath, 1798.

[16] J Wood. John Wood's Welsh town plans. `https://www.llgc.org.uk/en/discover/digital-gallery/maps/john-woods-welsh-town-plans/`, 1834.

[17] H Wyndham. *Gleanings through Wales, Holland and Westphalia*. Pratt, 1775. Published anonymously.