

Norfolk Record Office Information Leaflet 26

Great Yarmouth Town Wall

Thousands of people visit Great Yarmouth each summer, but few of them know what a long history the town has. Very few probably notice the old town wall which is among the best-preserved town walls in England. It is by far the best wall in East Anglia and stands comparison with the much more famous walls at York and Chester. This leaflet outlines the history of the wall and will, hopefully, encourage some people to take a look for themselves.

Permission to enclose the town of Great Yarmouth with a wall and ditch was granted by Henry III in 1261. However the wall was not begun until 1285. It was paid for by a tax called murage levied on goods brought into the Borough. Many Yarmouth citizens also made a voluntary contribution by leaving money in their wills for work on the wall. The wall is not a complete circuit - it encloses the town on three sides, the river being the defence on the fourth side. The work took many years - the main part was finished in 1346, but work continued until about 1400. The wall was over 23 feet high and 2,280 yards long, with ten gates and sixteen towers. The front of the wall is of cut flint and most of the towers are 'D'-shaped. Although its main purpose was military it also served as a customs barrier. Restricting the number of ways in and out of the town made it easier to regulate traders and make sure all tolls were paid.

The upper parts of the wall and the tops of the towers were rebuilt in the fifteenth or early sixteenth century, probably to take cannon. The work of this date incorporates very attractive panelling in flint and brick. From 1545 onwards the wall was rampired - that is backed with banks of earth to strengthen it to withstand artillery fire. In 1557 the section of the wall east of Friars' Lane collapsed. It was rebuilt by the town, using stone from the nearby Dominican friary which had been dissolved in 1538. A good deal of reused medieval freestone can still be seen in the wall between Friars' Lane and the South East Tower.

In the sixteenth century, Yarmouth was noted for its town wall. In 1558 the dramatist Thomas Nash called Yarmouth a

'flinty ring of 15 towers which sent out thunder whenever a Spaniard dared to come near.'

The wall was maintained until the seventeenth century and was last manned during the Civil War. Buildings against the wall were cleared, guns were placed on it and a ditch built around the most vulnerable part - the north wall and the east wall as far south as Pudding Gate. The ditch was sixty feet wide and eight feet deep. After the Civil War the wall was allowed to decay and people again began to put up buildings against it. Most of the rampires were removed. Between 1776 and 1812 all ten gates were pulled down as the roads out of the town were widened. As late as 1902 a section of the wall between Northgate Street and the North West tower was demolished: however this act of destruction upset many people who cared about the history of the town.

Great Yarmouth town wall is still remarkably complete, both in its length and in its height: the section north of the South East Tower even retains its battlements. Substantial remains of the 'wall-walk' arches on the inner side of the wall still exist: they can be seen in the Dissenters' Churchyard and where the wall runs under Market Gates shopping centre. Eleven towers have survived, seven largely intact - Palmer's Tower, the tower on Blackfriars Road, the South East Tower (now incorporating an exhibition centre and pottery), Hospital Tower, King Henry's Tower (the only octagonal one), the North East Tower, and the North West Tower (now isolated on North Quay).

The wall is also one of the few to have associated earthworks surviving. These include the rampires in the churchyard and behind the section of wall facing Blackfriars Road. In a report of 1966 the Borough Archivist stated that there were still 'some vestiges' of the South Mount: this was an earthwork on the South Quay, between the river and the site of the South Gate. This area is now covered by the Mayer Parry recycling plant. The historian St J. O'Neill considered Yarmouth to have the only remains still existing in England of a ravelin - that is a triangular defensive outwork in front of the wall. This is just to the east of St George's church but only boundary walls now mark the site. It can best be seen from St Peter's Plain where a plaque is attached to the wall about 12 feet above the ground.

Great Yarmouth town wall is one of the few for which contemporary documents survive. There are detailed building accounts covering the years 1336-45. The wall is in fact one of the earliest closely dated examples of the use of brick in East Anglia. The wall is also depicted in two fine maps made during the reign of Elizabeth I: see below.

Records relating to the wall

All records are held by the Norfolk Record Office, unless otherwise specified. Document references are given in brackets.

Great Yarmouth Borough records in the Norfolk Record Office

- Murage rates 1447/8-1448/9 on the Borough Court rolls (Y/C 4/155,156).
- Murager's file containing accounts and inventory of munitions 1543/4 (Y/C 45/6).
- Papers re ownership of the Town Wall 1876-7 (Y/TC 28).
- Photographs of quay and Town Wall in right of way dispute nineteenth-twentieth centuries (Y/PH 842-75).

Records held elsewhere

- Murage disbursement rolls 1336-1345 in the British Library (Add. Mss. 1576-86).

- Perspective drawing of Yarmouth showing walls and towers, late 16th century. Original at Hatfield House. There are copies in A.W. Ecclestone, Henry Manship's Great Yarmouth (1971) and in Norfolk Archaeology, xxviii (1945).
- Plan of Yarmouth showing walls and towers, late sixteenth century. Original in British Library (Cott. MS, Aug. 1,74). Copy in C.J. Palmer, Manship's History of Great Yarmouth (1854).



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