

British Castles

April 2026



Caernarfon Castle
Edward I's Welsh Stronghold



EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

Welcome to the April 2026 issue of the British Castles magazine, which has a Caernarfon Castle theme.

The castle is probably the most famous of the series of fortifications built by Edward I to shore up this English King's hold over the (in his view) rebellious Welsh. It is the feature of our first article.

Our second article looks at all ten castles in the Ring of Iron. Our gallery is, as you'd expect, of these castles, as is this month's picture quiz.

Our 'Lesser Known British Castle' is Flint Castle, the first of the Ring to be constructed.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this month's edition

Chris



CAERNARFON CASTLE

HISTORY & GUIDE

Standing at the mouth of the River Seiont in north-west Wales, Caernarfon Castle is one of the most complete and impressive mediaeval fortresses in Europe. Its polygonal towers, distinctive banded stonework, and sheer scale make it immediately recognisable - and a visit leaves most people quietly astonished that something built in the 13th century could feel so thoroughly, almost aggressively, present.

A CASTLE BORN OF CONQUEST

To understand Caernarfon, you need to understand the man who built it. Edward I of England was, depending on your perspective, a gifted military strategist or a ruthless coloniser - most likely both. Having subdued Wales following the death of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, the last native Prince of Wales, in 1282, Edward set about making his conquest permanent. His method was simple and effective: castles.

Between roughly 1276 and 1295, Edward commissioned a chain of fortresses across north Wales in what remains one of the most ambitious building programmes of the mediaeval world. The so-called "Iron Ring" included Conwy, Harlech, Beaumaris, and Rhuddlan, among others. Collectively, they were designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1986. But Caernarfon was always the centrepiece - not merely a military installation, but a seat of imperial power.

CONSTRUCTION

Construction began in 1283 under the direction of Master James of St George, a Savoyard master builder who oversaw much of Edward's Welsh fortification programme.

The site itself was deliberate: it stood beside the existing Norman motte-and-bailey castle and the Roman fort of Segontium nearby, anchoring the new structure in a landscape already layered with power and history.



Eagle Tower Entrance

Edward made no subtle gestures. The design borrowed openly from the Theodosian walls of Constantinople - the banded masonry of different-coloured stone, the polygonal towers rather than the typical round ones - signals intended to project authority and permanence.

The Eagle Tower, the castle's grandest structure, originally bore stone eagles above its three turrets, reinforcing the imperial imagery further.



River Seiont

PRINCE OF WALES

In 1284, Edward ensured his new son - born at Caernarfon - was proclaimed Prince of Wales, a title that has been bestowed on the heir to the British throne ever since.

Whether the story of Edward promising the Welsh a prince 'born in Wales who could not speak a word of English' is apocryphal or not, the symbolism has stuck.

The castle became, and remains, bound up in questions of Welsh identity and the long shadow of English rule. That tension is part of what makes it such a genuinely interesting place to visit.

AFTER EDWARD

The castle was never fully completed. Work continued into the early 14th century, and some sections were left unfinished as the political urgency faded.

It was attacked twice during the rebellion led by Owain Glyndŵr in the early 1400s, though it held.

After that, it gradually fell into disuse and disrepair, before a significant programme of restoration in the 19th and early 20th centuries brought it to something close to its current condition.



Caernarfon Castle Overlooking Water

WHY VISIT?

The honest answer is: because very few places let you get this close to this much history.

Caernarfon is a working town, not a theme park, and the castle sits right at its heart. You can walk through the main gate and be inside the walls within minutes of parking or stepping off a bus.

There's no long approach road, no queuing through gift shops - you simply arrive.

Once inside, the scale becomes apparent in a way photographs don't quite capture. The walls are extraordinarily thick, the towers interconnected by a series of passages and stairs that you're free to explore at your own pace.



Climb to the top of the Eagle Tower and you get commanding views across the Menai Strait towards Anglesey and the mountains of Snowdonia (now rebranded Eryri) to the south-east. On a clear day it's a genuinely lovely prospect.

The castle also houses the Regimental Museum of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, one of the oldest infantry regiments in the British Army, which adds an unexpected layer of military history spanning several centuries. It's worth an hour if that sort of thing interests you.

What Caernarfon does particularly well is leave room for reflection. The audio guides are informative without being overbearing, and the interpretive displays engage honestly with the castle's complicated legacy - including Welsh resistance and the politics of investiture. The 1969 investiture of Prince Charles as Prince of Wales was held here, and photographs and footage from that ceremony are displayed inside; they make for interesting viewing, particularly now.

Children tend to do well here. There's enough space to roam, enough staircases to climb, and enough genuine drama in the architecture to hold attention without needing much supplementary entertainment.

PLANNING YOUR VISIT

Caernarfon is managed by Cadw, the Welsh Government's historic environment service, and is open year-round, though hours vary seasonally. Entry fees apply; concessions are available, and passes covering multiple Cadw sites can offer good value if you're planning to visit other Welsh castles - Conwy and Harlech are both within reasonable driving distance and well worth combining into a longer trip.

The town of Caernarfon itself is easily reached by road from the A55 North Wales Expressway, which connects to the wider motorway network. There is also a regular bus service from Bangor, which has a mainline railway station with services from London Euston (via Manchester) and Birmingham.

If you're basing yourself in the area, Snowdonia National Park is on the doorstep, making Caernarfon a natural anchor for a few days of exploration in north Wales.

Parking is available in the town centre, though it can be busy in summer. Arriving before midday on weekdays generally makes things easier.



Caernarfon From The Air

QUIZ: EDWARD I'S CASTLES

See if you can match the castles locations mentioned elsewhere in this issue, and listed below, with its photo. Each castle can appear more than once. Answers on page 24

Hawarden Castle

Caernarfon Castle

Rhuddlan Castle

Aberystwyth Castle

Conwy Castle

Harlech Castle

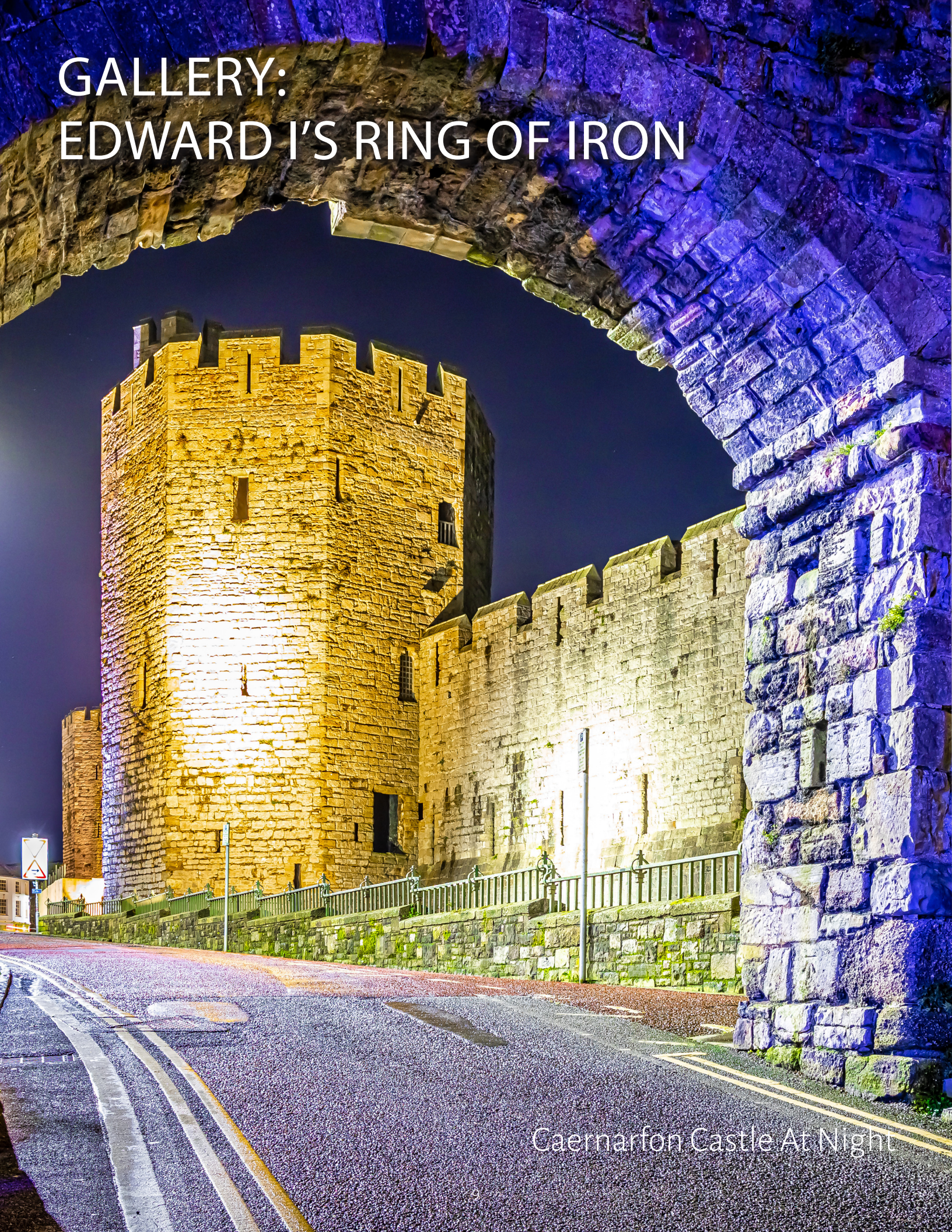
Flint Castle

Denbigh Castle





GALLERY: EDWARD I'S RING OF IRON



Caernarfon Castle At Night

Aberystwyth Castle







Beaumaris' Castle

Harlech Castle





Conwy Castle



Entrance To Beaumaris Castle



EDWARD I'S IRON RING

THE TEN CASTLES THAT CONQUERED WALES

In the late 13th century, King Edward I of England undertook one of the most ambitious military construction programmes in mediaeval history. Facing a Wales that had resisted English control for generations, Edward's solution was architectural: a chain of fortresses stretching across the north and west of the country, designed to encircle the heartland of Welsh resistance and make renewed revolt, as he hoped, impossible.

The result, known to historians as the Iron Ring, was a network of ten major castles built between 1277 and 1330, many of them among the finest examples of mediaeval military architecture anywhere in Europe.

The programme was overseen largely by Master James of St George, a Savoyard master builder whom Edward recruited from Savoy and paid at the extraordinary rate of three shillings a day.

James brought with him European ideas about concentric design - walls within walls - and applied them to the Welsh landscape with striking results. Four of the castles (Caernarfon, Conwy, Harlech, and Beaumaris) are now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Here are the ten castles in the order they were begun.

FLINT CASTLE (BEGUN 1277)

The first castle Edward ordered built in Wales sits on the Dee estuary in Flintshire, its distinctive round donjon - a separate keep positioned outside the main walls, unique in Britain - reflected in the tidal mud.

Construction began in July 1277, just weeks after Edward's army crossed the border. Significantly slighted after the Civil War, the ruins nonetheless retain genuine presence, especially donjon's unusual design.

Flint is the subject of our third article in this issue.

HAWARDEN CASTLE (BEGUN 1277)

Hawarden in Flintshire commands an elevated position that had been fortified since the Iron Age. Edward reinforced an existing Norman motte-and-bailey structure here, making it a key link in the eastern chain.

Its significance is partly political: it was a Welsh attack on Hawarden in April 1282 - carried out by Dafydd ap Gruffydd - that triggered Edward's final, decisive campaign of conquest.

The castle and its grounds later became the estate of Victorian Prime Minister William Gladstone.



Entrance To Hawarden Estate

RHUDDLAN CASTLE (BEGUN 1277)

Built in a distinctive concentric diamond layout on the banks of the River Clwyd, Rhuddlan was Master James of St George's first major commission in Wales. To supply the castle by sea, Edward ordered the river to be canalised - a significant engineering feat.

In 1284, the Statute of Rhuddlan was signed here, formally reorganising Wales under English administration. The ruins, including twin drum towers and a surviving gatehouse, are managed by Cadw and open to visitors.

BUILTH CASTLE (BEGUN 1277)

Of all ten, Builth is the most melancholy. Construction began in 1277 but was never completed, and today nothing stands above ground - only grassy earthwork mounds mark the site near the modern town of Builth Wells in Powys.

The castle gained a grim historical footnote: it was near here, in December 1282, that Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, the last native Prince of Wales, was killed in a skirmish. The garrison at Builth reportedly refused him shelter on the night of his death.

ABERYSTWYTH CASTLE (BEGUN 1277)

On the west coast of Wales where the Rivers Rheidol and Ystwyth meet the sea, Aberystwyth Castle was built on a diamond-shaped concentric plan similar to Rhuddlan.

It was sacked during Madog ap Llywelyn's rebellion in 1294 and later fell to Owain Glyndŵr in 1404.

Oliver Cromwell ordered it slighted in 1649, and the ruins that remain - dramatically perched above the seafront - are now a popular walking destination in a town better known today for its university.



Aberystwyth Castle



Denbigh Castle

DENBIGH CASTLE (BEGUN 1282)

Denbigh marks the beginning of the second phase of the Iron Ring, constructed after the Welsh rising of 1282 intensified the programme.

Built on a commanding hilltop in the Vale of Clwyd, it was granted to Edward's ally Henry de Lacy rather than built as a royal castle - making it unusual among the ten.

Its elaborate triple-towered gatehouse is one of the most striking pieces of Edwardian castle architecture surviving anywhere in Wales, and the views across the vale are exceptional.

CONWY CASTLE (BEGUN 1283)

Built in just four years between 1283 and 1287, Conwy is a masterpiece of concentrated military design.

Its eight massive round towers are arranged along a narrow rock promontory above the River Conwy, and the surrounding town walls - largely intact - stretch for nearly three-quarters of a mile.

Richard II sheltered here in 1399 before being lured out and captured. Today, viewed from the estuary with the mountains behind it, Conwy remains one of the most photogenic castles in Britain.

CAERNARFON CASTLE (BEGUN 1283)

The centrepiece of the Iron Ring and Edward's seat of power in Wales, Caernarfon was designed not merely as a fortress but as a symbol of imperial authority.

It's the subject of the first article in this issue.



HARLECH CASTLE (BEGUN 1283)

Harlech perches dramatically atop a near-vertical rock outcrop on the Merionethshire coast, its gatehouse - arguably the grandest in all of Edward's castles - facing inland towards the mountains. When built, the castle was accessible by sea; today the coastline has retreated, but the 'Way from the Sea' staircase down the cliff face survives.

During the Wars of the Roses, Harlech held out for seven years for the Lancastrian cause - a siege remembered in the song 'Men of Harlech'. It remained the last castle to fall to Parliament in the Civil War, in 1647.

BEAUMARIS CASTLE (BEGUN 1295)

The final and, in architectural terms, the most technically accomplished of Edward's Welsh castles, Beaumaris was begun in 1295 following the Madog ap Llywelyn rebellion - a reminder that the Iron Ring had not, after all, ended Welsh resistance.



Designed on flat ground on the Isle of Anglesey, Beaumaris achieves near-perfect concentric symmetry: the inner and outer walls align precisely, and the water-filled moat is fed directly from the sea.

It was never quite finished - funds ran out around 1330 - but it stands today as the most textbook example of mediaeval concentric castle design in Britain.



LESSER KNOWN BRITISH CASTLES

FLINT CASTLE

Before Caernarfon's towers, before Conwy's dramatic silhouette above the river, before Harlech perched on its cliff - there was Flint. The first stone Edward I placed in his Iron Ring of Welsh castles was here, on a low, marshy promontory jutting into the Dee Estuary in north-east Wales, in the summer of 1277.

It is the least visited of the ten, the most ruined in feel, and arguably the most historically layered. For those willing to step off the main tourist circuit, it repays the effort considerably.

THE BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING

Edward I launched his first Welsh campaign in the summer of 1277, marching an army westward from Chester along the north Wales coast. Within days of making camp, he had chosen a site and begun construction - simultaneously, as it turned out, at both Flint and Rhuddlan a few miles further west, though Flint is generally credited as the first.

The location was well chosen: a day's march from Chester, easily resupplied by sea up the Dee, and positioned to control the passage into north Wales. The king brought with him nearly 2,300 labourers, masons, and woodcutters. Within weeks, the ground was being broken.

Construction continued until around 1284, supervised from 1278 by Master James of St George - the Savoyard master builder who would go on to design much of the Iron Ring. By the time the main work was complete, Edward had spent just over £6,000 on the castle and its associated fortified town: a very considerable sum, equivalent in purchasing power to several million pounds today.

A DESIGN UNLIKE ANY OTHER IN BRITAIN

What makes Flint architecturally singular is its great tower, or 'donjon' - a massive round keep that stands entirely detached from the castle's inner ward. Three conventional rectangular towers occupy three corners of the square inner enclosure; where you might expect a fourth sits the donjon instead, separated from the main walls by its own moat and originally reached by a drawbridge.

It is, effectively, a castle within a castle: a final refuge to which the garrison could retreat if the outer walls were breached.

This design has no parallel elsewhere in Britain. Historians link it to Continental models - specifically to the Tour de Constance at Aigues-Mortes in southern France, which Edward had visited while travelling through on his way to the Crusades in 1270.

The donjon's walls are 7 metres thick at the base, tapering to 5 metres higher up, and it was equipped with all the facilities needed to withstand an extended siege. A spiral staircase installed inside in 2017 now allows visitors to climb to a viewing platform at the top, from which the views across the Dee Estuary towards the Wirral and the English shore are genuinely striking.



Flint Castle

UNDER SIEGE - TWICE IN TWELVE YEARS

Flint's military utility was tested almost immediately after completion.

In 1282, Welsh forces under Dafydd ap Gruffydd - brother of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, the last native Prince of Wales - besieged the castle as part of a broader uprising.

They were repulsed.

In 1294, during the revolt of Madog ap Llywelyn, Flint was attacked again, this time with greater effect.

The castle's constable was forced to set fire to parts of the fortress to prevent its capture. It was subsequently repaired and partly rebuilt.

These episodes are a useful reminder that the Iron Ring, however impressive in conception, did not immediately end Welsh resistance.

It took repeated military campaigns - and the eventual political accommodation of the Tudor dynasty in the following century - before the Edwardian fortresses became redundant as instruments of active control.



Flint Castle

SHAKESPEARE'S CASTLE

Beyond its military history, Flint has a remarkable literary claim. In August 1399, King Richard II - Edward I's great-great-grandson - was brought here following his capture near Conwy.

It was at Flint Castle that he came face to face with his cousin and rival Henry Bolingbroke, who would shortly seize the throne and rule as Henry IV. Richard, surrounded and outmanoeuvred, had little choice but to yield.

William Shakespeare immortalised the scene in 'Richard II' setting the confrontation explicitly here. In the play, Richard descends from the castle walls to meet Bolingbroke in the base court - the outer bailey - and gives up the pretence of resistance.



Battle Of Culloden

Richard II

It is one of the more affecting moments in the history play cycle: a king in a ruined castle, power draining away. Today, you can stand in what remains of that outer bailey and consider it for yourself. There is no charge to enter.

A small bronze sculpture of Richard II, installed near the castle entrance in recent years, marks the connection - along with his greyhound Mathe, who, according to legend, abandoned the king during the confrontation and transferred his loyalty to Bolingbroke. Richard took this as an omen of his own end.

Quiz Answers: 1. Denbigh Castle; 2. Conwy Castle; 3. Aberystwyth Castle; 4. Harlech Castle; 5. Rhuddlan Castle; 6. Hawarden Castle; 7. Flint Castle; 8. Denbigh Castle; 9. Harlech Castle; 10. Rhuddlan Castle; 11. Caernarfon Castle; 12. Hawarden Castle; 13. Conwy Castle; 14. Flint Castle



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