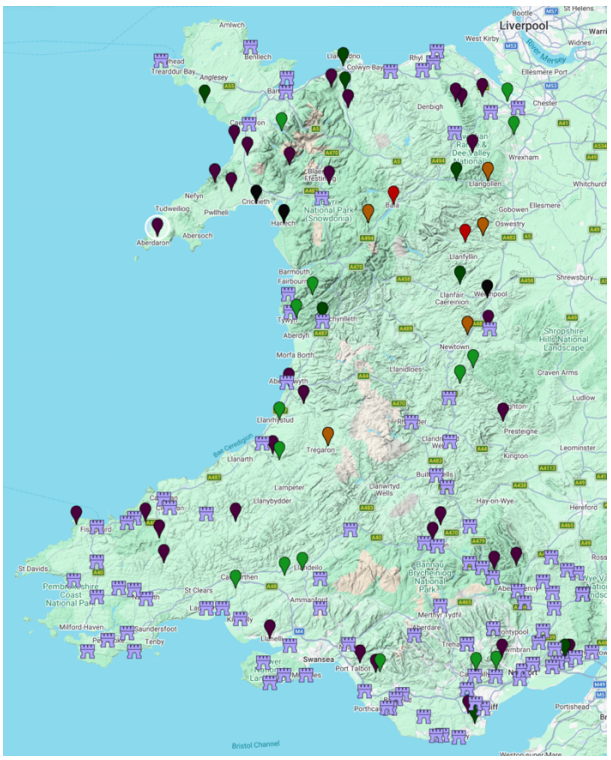
WELSH FORTRESSES THROUGH TIME



Three Thousand Years of Fortress-Building on the Most Contested Landscape in Europe

186 Sites · 8 Chronological Layers · Google My Maps
Iron Age Hillforts to Late Medieval Castles

https://tinyurl.com/Welsh-Fortresses-Map-Master

A Companion Document to the Digital Heritage Map

Graham Tudor Emmanuel
Independent Digital Heritage Researcher and Curator
Kidwelly, Carmarthenshire · 2026

INTRODUCTION

Wales is a small country that has been fought over for three thousand years. From the hillforts of the Iron Age tribes to the concentric castles of Edward I, from the rocky strongholds of the Welsh princes to the fortified manor houses of the late medieval gentry, its landscape carries more concentrated evidence of sustained military occupation and resistance than almost anywhere in Europe. This map and its companion document set out to chart that evidence layer by layer, from the earliest defended settlements to the last great medieval castles, placing 186 sites in their chronological and historical context across a landscape that shaped them and was shaped by them in return.

The map Welsh Fortresses Through Time is organised into eight chronological layers, each representing a distinct phase in the long story of fortress-building in Wales. The layers are not arbitrary divisions. Each one corresponds to a genuine historical moment — a change of technology, of political circumstance, of the balance of power between the peoples competing for control of this landscape. Moving through the layers from first to last is to move through three thousand years of Welsh history in the company of the people who built the defences, fought over them, and left them as the monuments they are today.

The sites on this map range from the vast earthwork hillforts of the Silures and Ordovices, enclosing tens of hectares on the summits of the Brecon Beacons and the Clwydian Range, to the intimate fortified manor houses of the Gower Peninsula and the Vale of Glamorgan. They include the Roman legionary fortress of Caerleon, one of the finest military complexes in northern Europe, and the signal station on Holyhead Mountain watching for Irish raiders. They include the llys sites of the early Welsh kingdoms, visible now only as earthwork platforms in quiet valleys, and the stone castles of Llywelyn the Great, built with a sophistication that matched anything the Normans had raised. They include the Iron Ring of Edward I, the most concentrated programme of castle-building in the medieval world, and the castles that Owain Glynŵr held, burnt, or made his capital in the last great revolt against English rule.

Sites prefixed WELSH throughout this document and marked with the Dragon icon on the map were built by Welsh hands, whether the communal labour of Iron Age communities raising earthwork ramparts, the princely architects of Gwynedd building in stone, or the native lords of the lesser Welsh territories asserting their presence in a contested landscape. The distinction between Welsh-built and Norman or English-built is not always clean — some sites changed hands, some were rebuilt by successive occupiers, some are of genuinely contested attribution — but where the primary construction can reasonably be attributed to Welsh builders, the Dragon flies.

The coordinates for every site on this map have been verified against a reference overlay and corrected where errors were found. The companion document that follows provides a narrative introduction to each of the eight layers and an individual entry for every one of the 186 sites, written to give each place its full historical weight. This is not a gazetteer of ruins. It is an attempt to put the people back into the landscape they built.

About This Map

Welsh Fortresses Through Time was compiled as a digital heritage map on Google My Maps, a platform chosen for its accessibility to the general public and its capacity to carry detailed descriptive content alongside precise geographical location. The map can be viewed on any device, shared freely, and used by anyone with an interest in the history of Wales. Each placemark carries a descriptive entry giving the site's period, character, and historical significance.

The eight chronological layers can be displayed individually or in combination, allowing the user to view the full 186-site map or to focus on a single period. Welsh-built sites are marked with the Dragon icon throughout. The colour coding of the layers provides immediate visual orientation as the chronological range expands from the Iron Age through to the late medieval period.

This companion document is designed to be read alongside the map, providing the extended historical narrative that the map format cannot accommodate. Each layer introduction sets the political and military context for the sites that follow. Each site entry gives the individual placemark its full story. Together they are intended to make the map not merely a tool for location but a means of understanding what these places meant to the people who built and fought over them.

Research for this project draws on the Coflein national database of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, the Cadw historic environment records, the published archaeological literature, and the primary documentary sources of Welsh and English medieval history. Where traditions and local associations are cited, they are identified as such. Where the historical record is uncertain or disputed, that uncertainty is acknowledged.

THE EIGHT LAYERS

A Summary of Contents

Layer 1 — Iron Age and Prehistoric

c.800 BC to 75 AD · 33 sites

The oldest layer of the map and in many ways the most enduring. Thirty-three hillforts and defended enclosures across Wales, from the great multivallate fortresses of the Clwydian Range and the Brecon Beacons to the stone-walled summit settlements of the Llŷn Peninsula and the Preseli Hills. Every site carries the Dragon icon. These earthworks belong to the Brythonic peoples whose descendants would become the Welsh nation, and they were here a thousand years before the first Norman set foot in Wales. Tre'r Ceiri, Pen-y-Crug, Llanmelin, Penycloddiau, Foel Drygarn — the greatest Iron Age monuments in Wales are all here, alongside the smaller defended farmsteads and promontory forts that made up the everyday landscape of prehistoric settlement.

Layer 2 — Roman and Romano-British

75 AD to c.410 AD · 10 sites

Ten sites spanning the three and a half centuries of Roman military occupation, from the legionary fortress of Isca Augusta at Caerleon — one of the finest Roman military complexes in northern Europe — to the late Roman signal station on Holyhead Mountain watching the Irish Sea. The Roman layer includes the tribal capital at Caerwent with its near-complete circuit of walls, the auxiliary forts at Brecon Gaer, Segontium, Tomen y Mur, and Gelligaer, and the native settlement at Din Lligwy on Anglesey where Iron Age building traditions and Roman material culture existed side by side. Wales was never a civilian province. It was, from first to last, a military landscape.

Layer 3 — Early Medieval Welsh

c.410 to 1066 AD · 9 sites

Nine sites from the six centuries between the Roman withdrawal and the Norman Conquest, the most elusive layer on the map because almost nothing survives above ground. The royal llys sites of the Welsh kingdoms — Aberffraw on Anglesey, Mathrafal in the Banwy valley — are earthwork platforms where once the kings of Gwynedd and Powys held court. Deganwy and Dinas Powys, both excavated, have yielded evidence of sophisticated post-Roman communities maintaining long-distance trade connections. Owain Glynŵr's ancestral mound at Glyndyfrdwy bridges the early and late medieval worlds. This layer requires the most imagination to read, but the history behind it is no less rich for being invisible.

Layer 4 — Norman First Wave

1067 to 1150 AD · 44 sites

The largest layer on the map, with forty-four sites recording the initial Norman thrust into Wales — the motte and bailey castles planted across the lowlands, coastal plains, and river valleys by lords acting largely on private initiative under the simple royal instruction that whatever they could take from the Welsh they could keep. Chepstow, the oldest post-Roman stone secular building in Britain. Pembroke, birthplace of Henry VII. Kidwelly, where Gwenllian fell. Cardiff, Cardiff built on Roman foundations by William the Conqueror himself. Manorbier, birthplace of Gerald of Wales. The Norman First Wave transformed the landscape of Wales irreversibly, even where Welsh resistance pushed the invaders back.

Layer 5 — Welsh and Norman Consolidation

1150 to 1240 AD · 42 sites

Forty-two sites from the century of consolidation in which both sides built more permanently, more ambitiously, and with greater architectural sophistication than the first Norman wave had attempted. The Welsh princes built in stone — Dinefwr, Dolbadarn, Castell y Bere, Dolforwyn — matching Norman ambition with indigenous equivalents designed to the landscape rather than imposed upon it. The Normans built Caerphilly, the largest castle in Wales, as a direct answer to Llywelyn ap Gruffudd. Between them the Monnow Gate, the Three Castles of Gwent, the episcopal palaces, the fortified manor houses, and the lesser motte castles of the march complete a layer of unmatched complexity and historical richness.

Layer 6 — Age of the Princes

1240 to 1277 AD · 8 sites

Eight sites from the generation in which Wales came closest to achieving permanent political unity under a single native ruler. Under Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, recognised by the Treaty of Montgomery in 1267 as Prince of Wales, the principality had borders, a government, and a legal identity acknowledged by the English crown. Dolforwyn was built in defiance of that crown. Dinas Bran held the north. Aberystwyth anchored the coast. Sycharth was the cultured household that the revolt of 1400 would destroy. This is the layer of the high-water mark — and of its reversal. By 1277 Edward I had begun the campaign that would end with Llywelyn's death at Cilmeri and Dafydd's execution at Shrewsbury.

Layer 7 — Edward I's Iron Ring

1277 to 1300 AD · 15 sites

Fifteen sites from the most concentrated programme of castle-building in the medieval world, conceived and executed by Edward I and his Savoyard architect Master James of St George between 1277 and 1295. Flint, Rhuddlan, Aberystwyth, Builth, Conwy, Caernarfon, Harlech, Beaumaris — each a masterpiece of military architecture, each accompanied by an English planted borough designed to make the conquest permanent and commercial as well as military. The Statute of Rhuddlan issued from within these walls in 1284 imposed English law on the conquered principality. The colonial towns excluded the Welsh from trade and office within their walls. The Iron Ring was iron in more than stone.

Layer 8 — Late Medieval

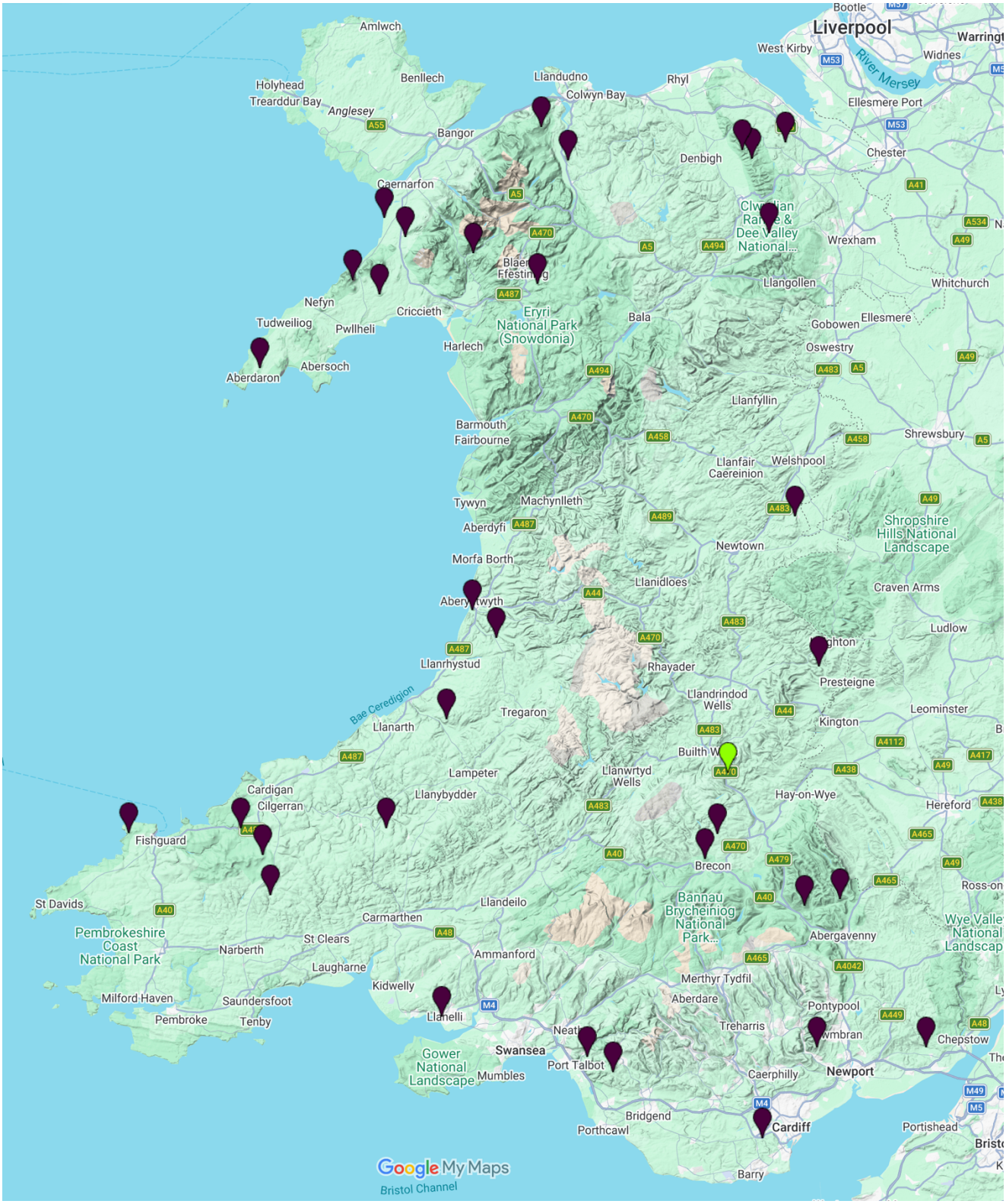
1300 to 1450 AD · 25 sites

Twenty-five sites from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, spanning the full arc from the aftermath of the Edwardian conquest to the end of Owain Glynŵr's revolt and the emergence of the Tudor settlement that followed. Raglan, the last great medieval castle in Wales, built with aristocratic magnificence in 1435. Harlech as Glynŵr's capital, the castle of English conquest repurposed as the seat of Welsh resistance. Carreg Cennen on its limestone crag with its unique underground passage. Tretower Castle and Court side by side, the military and the domestic in direct succession. The seventeen newly added sites of this edition, from Aberedw where Llywelyn spent his last night to Wolf's Castle where Norman colonisation left its name on the Pembrokeshire landscape.

WELSH FORTRESSES THROUGH TIME

A Companion Document

LAYER 1 — IRON AGE AND PREHISTORIC C.800 BC TO 75 AD



Before the Romans came, before the Normans, before any castle was raised in stone or timber, the people of Wales built their defences on the high ground. The hillforts of the Iron Age are the oldest layer of this map and in many ways the most enduring. Their earthwork ramparts still crown the ridgelines of Snowdonia, the Preseli Hills, the Clwydian Range, and the coalfield uplands of the south. They were not built in a single generation or by a single people. The earliest date from around 800 BC. The latest were still occupied when the Roman legions arrived in the 70s AD. Some were great tribal centres enclosing tens of hectares. Others were little more than a defended farmstead on a commanding spur. All of them spoke the same language of stone, earth, and height.

The tribes who built them — the Silures of the south-east, the Ordovices of the north and centre, the Demetae of the west — left no written record. What survives is the earthwork itself: the multiple ditches of a multivallate fort like Penycloddiau or Pen-y-Crug, the stone walls of Tre'r Ceiri still standing to near-original height on the Llŷn Peninsula, the Bronze Age cairns incorporated into the Iron Age defences of Foel Drygarn on the Preseli Hills as if the builders wished to anchor themselves to an even deeper past. These were not primitive works. They represent centuries of accumulated knowledge about terrain, construction, and the psychology of defence.

Every site on this layer carries the Dragon icon. These hillforts are Welsh in the oldest sense of the word — they are the work of the Brythonic peoples whose descendants would become the Welsh nation. The Romans would subdue them, the Normans would insert their own mottes into some of their ancient ramparts, but the hillforts themselves belong to no conqueror. They were here first.

WELSH · Bryn-y-Castell Hillfort · c.100 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A multivallate hillfort on the slopes of the Rhinog mountains in Merionethshire, Bryn-y-Castell is notable for the evidence of iron-smelting activity found within its defences. Occupation extended from the late Bronze Age through into the Roman period, making it one of the longer-lived defended sites in mid-Wales. Its position on the Rhinog ridge commands the approaches to the Mawddach estuary below.

WELSH · Caer Bach Hillfort · c.500 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A small defended enclosure on the northern fringe of Snowdonia, Caer Bach commands views across the Conwy valley from its elevated position. Its modest scale suggests use as a farmstead strongpoint rather than a major tribal centre, one of many such minor defended sites that populated the landscape between the great hillforts.

WELSH · Caer Engan Hill Fort · c.500 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

An oval hillfort on the Llŷn Peninsula with well-preserved earthwork ramparts, Caer Engan is one of a series of defended sites commanding the peninsula's high ground. The Llŷn was densely settled in the Iron Age and its string of hillforts reflects both the wealth of the peninsula's farming communities and their need for defensible refuge.

WELSH · Caerau Hillfort, Cardiff · c.600 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

One of the largest hillforts in the Cardiff area, Caerau encloses nearly eleven hectares on a prominent ridge above the Ely valley. Later a Norman ringwork was inserted within its ancient defences, a pattern repeated at several sites on this map where the Normans recognised and reused the same commanding ground that the Iron Age communities had chosen centuries before.

WELSH · Cam Pentyrch Hillfort · c.500 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A promontory fort on the northern edge of the south Wales coalfield, Cam Pentyrch utilises the natural scarps of the ridge to reduce the earthwork required on its defended approaches. It commands the broad lowland corridor between the uplands and the Bristol Channel coast.

WELSH · Camwyllion Castle · c.400 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

An Iron Age promontory fort on the Gower Peninsula later reused as a Norman ringwork, Camwyllion illustrates the continuity of strategically commanding positions across the centuries. The Normans who built their ringwork here were following the same instinct as the Iron Age community that first chose this headland — elevation, sea views, and natural defensive advantage on three sides.

WELSH · Castell Foel Allt · c.500 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A hillfort on the high ground between the Wye and Severn watersheds in mid-Wales, Castell Foel Allt commands the upland terrain with earthwork ramparts enclosing a modest summit area. It stands in the territory of the Ordovices, the tribe whose fierce resistance to Rome made the pacification of central Wales one of the most costly campaigns of the conquest.

WELSH · Castell Henllys Iron Age Fort · c.500 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A reconstructed Iron Age hillfort in the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, Castell Henllys is unique in Wales for the experimental roundhouse rebuilding that has taken place on the original archaeological footprints of the ancient structures. Visitors walk into reconstructed buildings standing where the originals stood. The archaeology beneath is real. The experience is as close as any site in Wales comes to placing you inside the Iron Age.

WELSH · Castell Odo · c.400 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A small oval enclosure on the southern Llŷn Peninsula, Castell Odo was excavated in the 1950s to reveal evidence of timber roundhouses and metalworking within its earth-and-stone ramparts. Small sites like this one were the norm rather than the exception across the Iron Age landscape — most people lived not in great tribal capitals but in defended farmsteads of this scale.

WELSH · Castell Perthi-mawr Hillfort · c.400 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A univallate defended enclosure on the Preseli foothills of north Pembrokeshire, Castell Perthi-mawr sits within a wider prehistoric landscape of outstanding richness. The Preseli Hills were a sacred and productive upland throughout prehistory, their spotted dolerite quarried for the bluestones of Stonehenge and their ridgelines marked by cairns, standing stones, and defended enclosures spanning three thousand years.

WELSH · Crug Hywel Hillfort · c.500 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

Known in English as Table Mountain, this prominent flat-topped hillfort above Crickhowell commands the upper Usk valley with clarity. Its name was later adopted by the Norman castle town that grew below it — Crickhowell is the anglicised form of Crug Hywel — making this one of the few cases where an Iron Age hillfort directly gave its name to a medieval settlement. The terraced ramparts remain clearly visible on the plateau edge.

WELSH · Dinas Dinlle · c.400 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A coastal hillfort on the Arfon shore, Dinas Dinlle's seaward face has been significantly eroded by the sea over the centuries and continues to retreat. What remains commands the southern approach to the

Menai Strait. The site was occupied into the Roman period and tradition associates it with the mythological figure of Lleu Llaw Gyffes, one of the heroes of the Mabinogion.

WELSH · Dinas Emrys Hill Fort · c.500 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A rocky hillfort in Snowdonia above the Glaslyn valley, Dinas Emrys is associated in medieval legend with the wizard Merlin and the prophetic red and white dragons whose combat beneath the hill was said to be destabilising Vortigern's tower. Excavation has confirmed Dark Age occupation of a site with much earlier origins, lending the legend an unexpected archaeological grounding.

WELSH · Ffridd Faldwyn Iron Age Hillfort · c.600 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

One of the earliest hillforts in Wales, with occupation beginning around 600 BC, Ffridd Faldwyn above Montgomery commands the upper Severn valley. Its excavated sequence shows a progression from an open settlement to a heavily defended refuge, the ramparts growing more elaborate as pressure on the community increased. It was one of the great tribal strongholds of the Ordovices.

WELSH · Foel Drygarn Hill Fort · c.800 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A hilltop enclosure on the Preseli Hills whose summit is crowned by three Bronze Age cairns incorporated into the later Iron Age defences, Foel Drygarn is a site of exceptional antiquity. The decision to build the hillfort around the existing cairns suggests a deliberate act of ancestral connection — the Iron Age community anchoring their defences to the sacred monuments of their predecessors.

WELSH · Garn Fawr Hillfort · c.600 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A stone-built hillfort on the northern tip of the Pencaer peninsula in north Pembrokeshire, Garn Fawr uses the natural tor of volcanic rock as its core, the builders incorporating the outcrop into the defences with considerable skill. Its position commands panoramic views of the Irish Sea, the Pembrokeshire coast, and on clear days the mountains of Ireland to the west.

WELSH · Gwal y Filiast · c.500 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

An Iron Age promontory fort on the western fringes of the Preseli Hills, its name meaning the hound's kennel, a reference to a legendary hunt of Welsh tradition. The site commands the approach from the west Pembrokeshire coast into the upland interior and forms part of the dense concentration of prehistoric monuments in this corner of Wales.

WELSH · Llanmelin Hillfort · c.400 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A multivallate hillfort near Caerwent in Gwent, Llanmelin is widely believed to have been the tribal capital of the Silures before the Roman conquest. Its elaborate earthwork defences enclose a substantial area and the finds recovered suggest high-status occupation. When the Romans pacified Gwent they moved the Silurian population into their new planned town at Venta Silurum — Caerwent — which can be seen from the hillfort's ramparts.

WELSH · Moel Arthur Hill Fort · c.600 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A small but strikingly positioned hillfort on the Clwydian Range, Moel Arthur's circular ramparts command the high ridge that runs north to south above the Vale of Clwyd. The site is part of a remarkable chain of hillforts along the Clwydian hills that together constitute one of the most coherent Iron Age defensive landscapes in north Wales.

WELSH · Moel y Gaer Hillfort · c.600 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A significant hillfort on the Clwydian Hills above Rhosesmor, Moel y Gaer was excavated by Professor Barry Cunliffe in the 1970s, revealing a sequence of timber-laced ramparts and round-house occupation spanning several centuries. The excavations produced evidence of the construction techniques used to build these great earthwork defences and of the domestic life of the communities who sheltered within them.

WELSH · Pencastell · c.400 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A defended enclosure on the northern Llŷn Peninsula, Pencastell is one of numerous small hillforts that characterise the defensively sensitive landscape of this westward-pointing peninsula. The Llŷn hillforts are closely spaced, suggesting a landscape of competing chieftains rather than a single unified territorial power.

WELSH · Pen Dinas Hill Fort, Aberystwyth · c.800 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A twin-peaked hillfort above Aberystwyth harbour, Pen Dinas occupied both summits of its prominent ridge, the two hilltops connected by a cross-dyke and each defended by its own ramparts. Occupation spanned from the Bronze Age into the Iron Age. The site commands the Rheidol and Ystwyth estuaries, the natural harbour, and the coastal approaches from both north and south.

WELSH · Pen-y-Castell Cwmavon · c.400 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A hillfort above the Afan valley on the south Wales coalfield ridge, Pen-y-Castell Cwmavon is one of a string of high-ground sites that defined territorial boundaries in this upland zone. The coalfield ridge was a significant landscape boundary between the lowland territories of Glamorgan and the wilder uplands beyond.

WELSH · Pen-y-Castell Hillfort · c.500 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A defensive enclosure on the high ground of Snowdonia's southern flanks, commanding the important east-west route through the mountains. Sites of this kind on the approaches to the Snowdonian massif controlled movement through the mountain passes that served as the main arteries of pre-Roman north Wales.

WELSH · Pen-y-Crug Hillfort · c.600 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A large multivallate hillfort above Brecon, Pen-y-Crug commands the confluence of the Usk and Honddu rivers from its prominent summit. The multiple concentric ramparts enclose a substantial area and the site is one of the most important later prehistoric monuments in the Brecon Beacons landscape. It is visible from much of the upper Usk valley and would have been a powerful statement of territorial authority.

WELSH · Penycloddiau Hill Fort · c.600 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

The largest hillfort on the Clwydian Range, Penycloddiau takes its name — the hill of the ditches — from the concentric earthwork defences that make it one of the most visually impressive hillfort earthworks in north Wales. The inner ramparts enclose over twenty hectares, large enough to shelter a substantial population in times of threat. It forms the northern anchor of the Clwydian chain of hillforts.

WELSH · Tomen y Rhodwydd Hill Fort · c.400 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

An Iron Age hillfort in Denbighshire later adapted as a Norman motte site, Tomen y Rhodwydd's elevated position commanded the route through the Clwyd valley, making it a target for successive occupiers across two thousand years. The Norman motte inserted within the earlier earthworks is a clear sign that the strategic value of the position was as obvious to a twelfth-century knight as to an Iron Age chieftain.

WELSH · Tre'r Ceiri Hillfort · c.200 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

One of the finest and best-preserved hillforts in Wales, Tre'r Ceiri on the Llŷn Peninsula stands with its stone-built walls surviving to near-original height in several places. Within the walls a remarkable density of round-house platforms has been recorded, suggesting a permanent settlement of some size. The site was occupied into the Roman period and its Latin name, the town of the giants, reflects the wonder it inspired in later visitors who could not conceive of native builders raising such walls.

WELSH · Twmbarlwm Hill Fort · c.500 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A hilltop fort above Risca in Gwent with a Norman motte later inserted at its summit, Twmbarlwm is one of the most visually dramatic multi-period sites in south-east Wales. The combination of the Iron Age earthworks, the Norman mound, and the panoramic position above the coalfield valleys creates a monument that speaks across two thousand years of Welsh history in a single skyline silhouette.

WELSH · Twyn y Gaer Hill Fort · c.500 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A hillfort above the Grwyne valley in the Black Mountains, Twyn y Gaer commands the approaches from the English border into the upland heartland of Gwent. It is one of a series of border hillforts that defined the eastern edge of Welsh-controlled territory across the Iron Age and into the early medieval period.

WELSH · Twyn-y-Gaer, Llaneglwys · c.400 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A defended enclosure in the upper Wye valley area of Breconshire, Twyn-y-Gaer at Llaneglwys occupies elevated ground above the Llynfi tributary. Like many upland enclosures of this period its primary function was probably the protection of livestock and the community during seasonal raiding rather than permanent fortification against a sustained military threat.

WELSH · Y Bwlwarcau Hillfort · c.400 BC

Iron Age and Prehistoric

A multivallate hillfort on Mynydd Margam above Port Talbot, Y Bwlwarcau takes its name — the ramparts — from the earthwork defences that remain its most visible feature. The site commands the coastal plain of Glamorgan and the crossing point between the uplands and the Bristol Channel shore, a position of considerable strategic importance in an era when movement of cattle, trade goods, and raiding parties followed the coastal corridors.

WELSH · Pen-y-Castell (Caer Oleu Camp) · c.500 BC

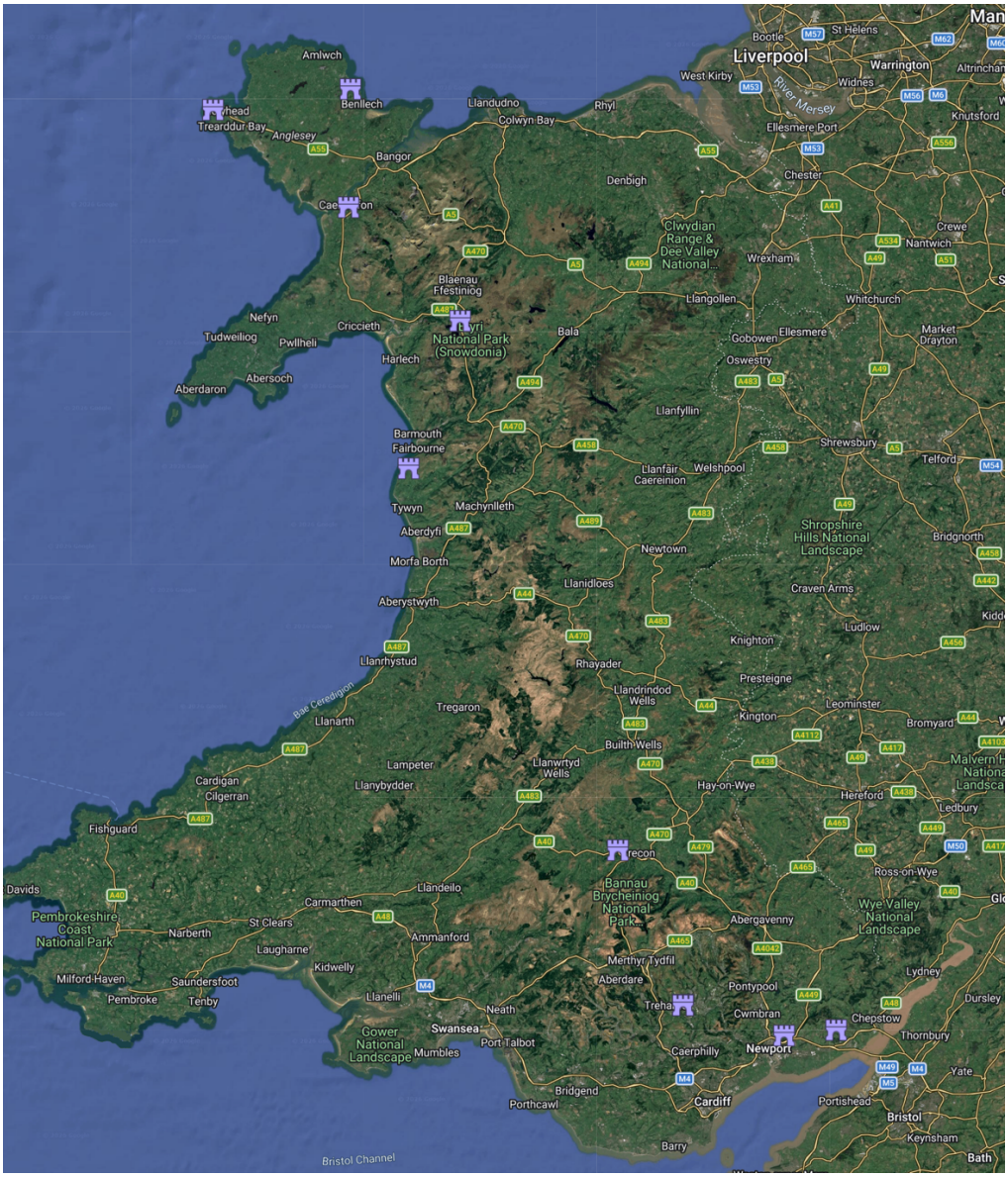
Iron Age and Prehistoric

A coastal hillfort on the Llŷn Peninsula associated with Caer Oleu, commanding maritime approaches and forming part of the network of defended sites along this exposed coastline. The Llŷn Peninsula faces the Irish Sea on three sides and its hillforts reflect a society acutely aware of seaborne threat and opportunity in equal measure.

WELSH FORTRESSES THROUGH TIME

A Companion Document

LAYER 2 — ROMAN AND ROMANO-BRITISH 75 AD TO C.410 AD



The Romans did not come to Wales as liberators, and they did not come as destroyers. They came as conquerors with a bureaucratic system, and Wales resisted them longer and more fiercely than almost anywhere else in Britain. The Silures of the south-east fought for a generation under Caratacus and then without him, inflicting repeated defeats on Roman forces before Publius Ostorius Scapula finally broke their resistance in the 50s AD. The Ordovices of the north and centre were still fighting in 78 AD when Agricola destroyed their army and crossed to Anglesey to extinguish the Druidic presence that had sustained British resistance across the province.

What the Romans built in Wales was above all a military infrastructure. The legionary fortress at Caerleon, the auxiliary forts at Brecon Gaer, Segontium, Tomen y Mur, and Gelligaer, the signal stations on the coast, the roads connecting them — these were the apparatus of occupation rather than

settlement. Wales never became a civilian province in the way that the south-east of England did. There were no great Romano-British villas, no thriving market towns except at Caerwent. The garrison remained in the forts, the native population continued in their farmsteads and, as at Din Lligwy, in their traditional enclosed settlements.

Yet the Roman centuries left their mark in ways that outlasted the legions. The roads shaped Welsh geography for a thousand years after the last soldier left. The walls of Caerwent stood as a ready-made town for whoever came next. At Caerleon the sheer scale of what remained inspired Geoffrey of Monmouth to place Arthur's capital there in the twelfth century. And the Christianity that came with the Roman world, filtering into Wales through the western sea lanes before the official conversion of the empire, would shape Welsh culture more profoundly than any fortress.

Brecon Gaer Roman Fort (Y Gaer) · 75 AD

Roman and Romano-British

The auxiliary fort of Y Gaer was established around 75 AD at the confluence of the Usk and Ysgir rivers, a position chosen with the precision that characterised Roman military planning. The fort housed cavalry units in its early decades and later infantry cohorts, its garrison drawn from across the empire — Spain, North Africa, the Balkans. The visible remains include substantial sections of gate towers and defensive wall. Excavation by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in the 1920s first revealed the full plan of the fort. The site sits within the grounds of what is now a private estate, the walls emerging from the parkland grass as unexpected survivors of a world two thousand years removed.

Caer y Twr Signal Station · c.300 AD

Roman and Romano-British

A late Roman signal station and watchtower on Holyhead Mountain, the highest point of Holy Island off the north-west coast of Anglesey, Caer y Twr formed part of the coastal surveillance network monitoring Irish Sea approaches in the later empire. By the third and fourth centuries AD Irish raiding was a serious and persistent threat to the western coastline of Roman Britain, and watchtowers like this one were the early warning system of their age. The stone enclosure walls remain clearly visible on the mountain summit, one of the most dramatically positioned Roman military structures in Wales.

Castell-y-Gaer Hillfort · Iron Age and Roman

Roman and Romano-British

A hillfort site in mid-Wales showing evidence of both Iron Age and Roman period occupation, Castell-y-Gaer illustrates the gradual transition and co-existence of indigenous and Roman military presence in the Welsh interior. Not all hillforts were abandoned at the conquest. Some continued in occupation, their communities adapting to Roman rule while maintaining their traditional defended settlements. Castell-y-Gaer is a reminder that the Roman conquest of Wales was not a sudden replacement of one world by another but a slow and uneven process of absorption.

Din Lligwy Walled Settlement · c.300 AD

Roman and Romano-British

A late Roman native settlement on Anglesey, Din Lligwy is one of the most remarkable sites of its period in Wales. Its irregular pentagonal enclosure wall, built from massive drystone slabs, stands to considerable height and encloses a complex of round and rectangular buildings. Excavation recovered significant quantities of late Roman material — coins, pottery, metalwork — confirming occupation in the third and fourth centuries AD. The settlement represents native Britons living within the Roman world on their own terms, maintaining indigenous building traditions while benefiting from Roman trade. The consolidation for public display has preserved the site in exceptional condition.

Gelligaer Roman Fort 1 · c.75 AD

Roman and Romano-British

The earlier of two Roman forts at Gelligaer in Glamorgan, this Flavian-period auxiliary fort was established in the years immediately following the conquest of the Silures to secure Roman control of

the upland corridor north of Cardiff. It is one of the first generation of permanent Roman military installations in south Wales, part of the network of forts and roads that stitched the newly conquered territory into the fabric of the empire.

Gelligaer Roman Fort 2 · c.100 AD

Roman and Romano-British

The Trajanic replacement fort at Gelligaer, rebuilt in stone around 100 AD, is one of the best-preserved examples of a complete Roman auxiliary fort plan in Wales. The outlines of the principia, barracks, bath-house, and annexe are clearly traceable in the turf. The decision to rebuild in stone after a generation of use reflects Roman confidence that Wales was now permanently held and worth the investment of permanent infrastructure. Gelligaer represents the Roman military machine at its most systematic.

Isca Augusta, Caerleon · 75 AD

Roman and Romano-British

The legionary fortress of the Second Augustan Legion, established around 75 AD at the confluence of the Usk and Afon Lwyd rivers, Isca Augusta was the military capital of Roman Wales for over two centuries. A full Roman legion of some five thousand men was garrisoned here, and the fortress grew to encompass an amphitheatre, elaborate baths, barracks, granaries, a hospital, and workshops behind its defensive walls. The amphitheatre at Caerleon is the best-preserved Roman amphitheatre in Britain. The baths complex, only partially excavated, rivals anything in the Roman province. Geoffrey of Monmouth chose Caerleon as the capital of his legendary King Arthur, and the sheer scale of the ruins that remained visible in the twelfth century makes that choice entirely understandable.

Segontium Roman Fort, Caernarfon · 77 AD

Roman and Romano-British

The fort of Segontium was established during Agricola's campaigns of 77 AD to control the Menai Strait and the approaches to Anglesey, whose Druidic groves had been the spiritual heart of British resistance to Rome. Occupied for over three centuries with only brief interruptions, Segontium became one of the longest-serving Roman military installations in Wales. The site museum displays excavated finds of exceptional quality including the famous hoard of Roman religious objects. Edward I chose the same commanding position above the strait for his great castle of Caernarfon, a coincidence that is not entirely coincidental.

Tomen y Mur Roman Fort · 78 AD

Roman and Romano-British

A remote auxiliary fort in the uplands of Merionethshire, Tomen y Mur was established during Agricola's advance through north Wales to control the mountain passes of Snowdonia. Its isolation in the bare upland landscape gives it a quality shared by few other Roman sites in Wales — standing on the earthwork platform you understand immediately why maintaining a garrison here through the long Welsh winters tested Roman military logistics to their limit. A Norman motte was later inserted within the fort walls, making Tomen y Mur one of the very few sites in Wales where Roman and Norman military architecture physically overlap on the same ground.

Venta Silurum, Caerwent · c.75 AD

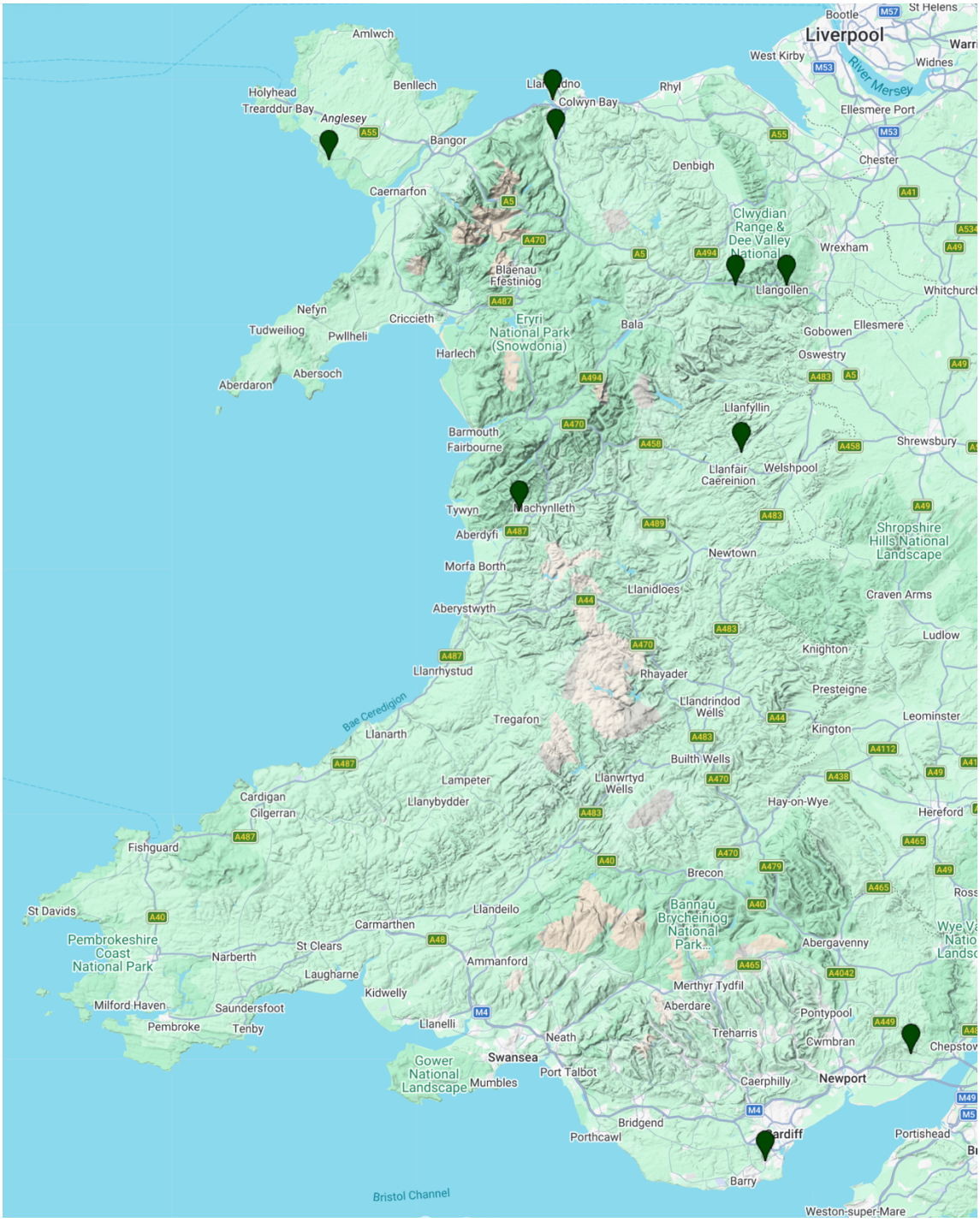
Roman and Romano-British

The tribal capital of the Silures under Roman rule, Caerwent preserves the most complete circuit of Roman town walls in Wales and remains the finest example of a Romano-British civitas capital in Britain. The walls stand to near-original height in several places, their bastions added in the fourth century still projecting from the curtain as they have for seventeen hundred years. Within the walls the street grid, forum, basilica, temples, and town houses have been extensively excavated. The inscription that records the dedication of a monument by the ordo, the town council of the Silures, is one of the most important pieces of Roman epigraphy in Britain — proof that the fiercest opponents of the Roman conquest became, within a generation, the administrators of a Roman town.

WELSH FORTRESSES THROUGH TIME

A Companion Document

LAYER 3 — EARLY MEDIEVAL WELSH C.410 TO 1066 AD



When the Roman legions left Britain in the early fifth century, they did not leave a vacuum. They left a world that had to reorganise itself quickly and under pressure, and in Wales that reorganisation produced something remarkable. The kingdoms of early medieval Wales — Gwynedd in the north, Powys in the centre and east, Deheubarth in the south-west, Gwent and Glywysing in the south-east —

were not the ruins of Rome. They were something new, rooted in the older Brythonic tribal structures but shaped by Christianity, by the memory of empire, and by the very real and pressing threat of raiders from Ireland, from Pictland, and eventually from the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms pressing westward from England.

The defended sites of this layer are different in character from what came before and what came after. They are not the great earthwork hillforts of the Iron Age, built by communal labour over generations. They are not the stone castles of the Normans, built to dominate a conquered landscape. They are the courts and strongholds of Welsh kings — the llys sites like Aberffraw and Mathrafal where the royal household gathered, feasted, heard petitions, and dispensed justice; the rocky crags like Deganwy and Dinas Powys where a king could hold out against an enemy; the mounds and platforms that marked the centre of a lordship in the landscape.

Almost nothing survives above ground from this period. The royal halls were timber. The enclosures were earth. What remains are platforms, mounds, and the slight earthwork traces of enclosures that once housed the courts of kings whose names fill the pages of the Welsh chronicles and the poetry of the gogynfeirdd. Maelgwn Gwynedd, Rhodri Mawr, Hywel Dda, Gruffudd ap Llywelyn — the men who shaped Wales in these six centuries lived and ruled in places that have left almost no stone above ground. The absence is itself a kind of statement about a culture that valued the spoken word, the genealogy, the poem, over the permanent record in masonry.

WELSH · Aberffraw Royal Court · c.500 AD

Early Medieval Welsh

The principal llys of the kingdom of Gwynedd for nearly seven centuries, Aberffraw on the south-west coast of Anglesey was the seat of the royal line that would eventually style itself Princes of Wales. From this place the kings of Gwynedd ruled the most powerful of the Welsh kingdoms through the darkest and most formative centuries of Welsh history. No visible remains survive above ground — the royal hall was a timber structure and the encroaching sand has done the rest — but the name Aberffraw carried a weight of sovereignty that every Welsh prince understood. To be king of Aberffraw was to claim the oldest royal seat in Wales.

WELSH · Bryn Castell / Castell Maelgwn · c.800 AD

Early Medieval Welsh

A rocky summit stronghold above the Mawddach estuary in Merionethshire, Bryn Castell is associated in tradition with Maelgwn Gwynedd, the sixth-century king of Gwynedd condemned by the monk Gildas as the dragon of the island, greatest in wickedness as in power. Whether or not Maelgwn used this specific site, the natural fortress of the crag above the estuary commanded a strategically vital position at the mouth of one of the principal river routes into the Snowdonian interior. The rocky summit still reads as a natural stronghold to any eye.

WELSH · Castell Dinas Bran · c.1260s

Early Medieval Welsh

The great hilltop castle of Dinas Bran above Llangollen may have incorporated an earlier Dark Age fortification within its twelfth and thirteenth-century stonework. The crag it occupies — a dramatically isolated conical hill above the Dee valley — is exactly the kind of natural stronghold that early medieval Welsh lords favoured, and occupation of the summit almost certainly predates the Norman period. It became the seat of the lords of Powys Fadog and was never taken by direct assault. Its ruins, silhouetted against the sky above Llangollen, are among the most evocative castle images in Wales.

WELSH · Deganwy Castle · c.500 AD

Early Medieval Welsh

Deganwy commanded the Conwy estuary from twin rocky summits and was the stronghold of Maelgwn Gwynedd in the sixth century, the place from which he dominated north Wales and terrorised his rivals. Gildas knew of Deganwy and its lord. The site witnessed centuries of conflict between Welsh princes and Norman invaders — taken, retaken, slighted, rebuilt, and contested across six hundred years of

Welsh history. Henry III poured immense resources into rebuilding Deganwy as an English fortress in the 1240s. Llywelyn ap Gruffudd starved the garrison out in 1263 and slighted it so thoroughly that Edward I chose to build his new castle at Conwy rather than attempt another restoration.

WELSH · Dinas Powys · c.450 AD

Early Medieval Welsh

A Dark Age defended settlement and high-status site in the Vale of Glamorgan, Dinas Powys was excavated by Leslie Alcock in the 1950s and became one of the defining sites for understanding post-Roman Wales. The finds recovered — imported Mediterranean pottery, glass, fine metalwork, evidence of bronze and iron working — revealed a community of considerable sophistication maintaining trading connections with the Mediterranean world long after the formal end of Roman Britain. This was not a world that had simply collapsed. It was a world that had reorganised itself around new centres of power, and Dinas Powys was one of them.

WELSH · Llanfair Discoed Castle · c.500 AD

Early Medieval Welsh

The earthwork remains at Llanfair Discoed in Gwent are associated with an early Welsh defended site before the Norman castle was later constructed nearby. The landscape around Llanfair Discoed retains multiple phases of occupation, from the Iron Age through the early medieval period and into the Norman centuries, each generation finding in the same elevated ground the same strategic advantages that had attracted their predecessors. The Norman castle that followed used the same natural spur above the Gwent plain.

WELSH · Mathrafal · c.700 AD

Early Medieval Welsh

The royal palace site of the kingdom of Powys, Mathrafal in the Banwy valley of Montgomeryshire served as the principal court of the Powysian kings for several centuries. It was the eastern kingdom's equivalent of Aberffraw — the place from which Powys was governed through the long centuries of pressure from Mercia and later the Normans. Llywelyn ap Iorwerth destroyed Mathrafal in 1212 when he moved against Gwenwynwyn of Powys, ending its role as a royal seat. The earthwork platform of the llys survives in a quiet valley setting, the Banwy running past it as it always has.

WELSH · Owain Glyndŵr's Mount, Glyndyfrdwy · c.1100 AD

Early Medieval Welsh

The moated mound at Glyndyfrdwy above the Dee valley was the ancestral seat of Owain Glyndŵr and the place from which he launched his great revolt on 16 September 1400, the day he was proclaimed Prince of Wales by his supporters. The mound is of early medieval character, a raised platform within a wet moat of the kind associated with the llys sites of the Welsh princes, and its use by Glyndŵr connects him directly to that tradition of native Welsh lordship. The earthworks remain clearly visible above the valley, a quiet monument to the most dramatic moment in late medieval Welsh history.

WELSH · Pennal Mound · c.800 AD

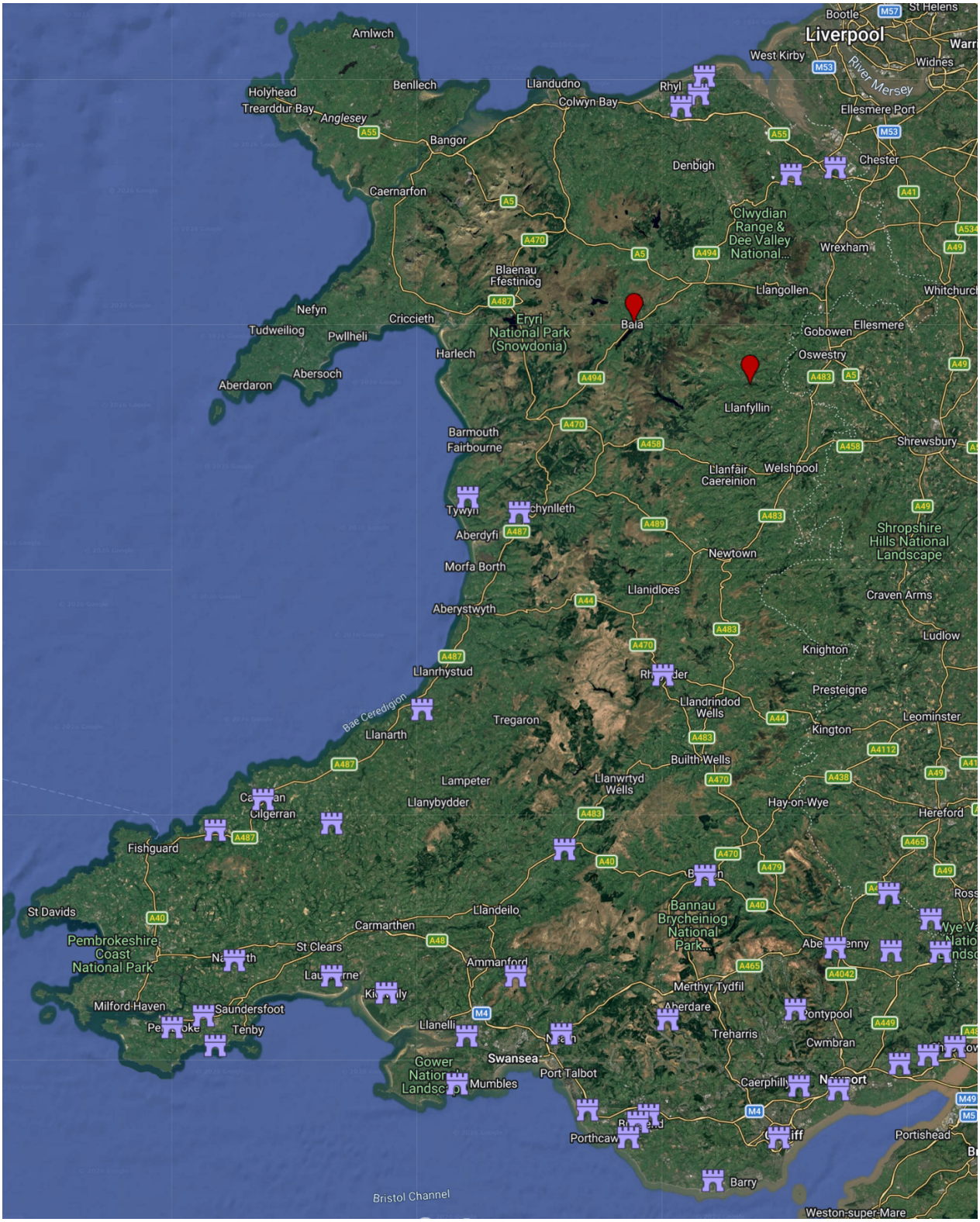
Early Medieval Welsh

An earthwork mound near Pennal in Merionethshire, associated with early medieval lordship in the Dyfi valley, the site occupies a position controlling the crossing of the Dyfi and the route between north and south Wales that the river valley provided. Pennal is also known to history through the Pennal Letter of 1406, in which Owain Glyndŵr declared his ecclesiastical allegiance to the Avignon papacy in return for promised support, one of the most significant diplomatic documents of the Welsh revolt. The early medieval mound and the memory of that letter together make Pennal a place where Welsh history has layered itself with unusual concentration.

WELSH FORTRESSES THROUGH TIME

A Companion Document

LAYER 4 — NORMAN FIRST WAVE 1067 TO 1150 AD



The Norman conquest of Wales did not happen at Hastings. It happened in a generation of brutal, piecemeal aggression by individual lords acting largely on their own initiative, pushing west from the border established by Offa's Dyke into territories that the English had never controlled. William the Conqueror gave his most aggressive marcher lords a simple instruction: whatever you can take from the Welsh, you may keep. It was an invitation to private conquest, and they took him at his word.

The instrument of that conquest was the castle. Not the great stone fortresses that came later, but the motte and bailey — a raised earthwork mound topped with a timber tower, surrounded by an enclosed bailey, the whole thing capable of construction by a small gang of men in a matter of weeks. Across south Wales, along the north coast, and into the river valleys of the interior, the Normans planted these earthwork castles like seeds, each one a declaration of ownership, each one a defended base from which the surrounding countryside could be exploited and controlled. Some grew into great stone fortresses. Many were abandoned when Welsh resistance reasserted itself. All of them changed the landscape of Wales permanently.

The Welsh did not submit. The generation after the first Norman thrust saw major Welsh uprisings across the country, the murder of Norman lords, the burning of their castles, and the recovery of large territories that had seemed permanently lost. The map of Norman Wales in 1150 was far less complete than it had appeared in 1100. But the castles that had survived — Chepstow, Pembroke, Cardiff, Kidwelly — had survived because they were too strong or too well-supported to be taken. And around those surviving castles, Norman settlement had taken root in a way that could not be undone. The first wave had receded in places, but it had left the tide marks of a changed world.

Abergavenny Castle · c.1087

Norman First Wave

Founded by Hamelin de Ballon shortly after the Conquest, Abergavenny Castle commanded the gateway from the English border into the Usk valley and the mountains beyond. It became notorious across Wales as the site of the Christmas massacre of 1175, when Ranulf de Poer invited Seisyll ap Dyfnwal and his leading chieftains to a feast and had them slaughtered at the table. De Poer's men then rode to Seisyll's home, killed his young son Cadwaladr, and seized his widow. The memory of that Christmas feast poisoned Welsh relations with the lords of Abergavenny for a generation and was cited in the chronicles as an example of Norman treachery that surpassed all others.

Brecon Castle · 1093

Norman First Wave

Founded by Bernard de Neufmarché following his defeat and killing of Rhys ap Tewdwr, king of Deheubarth, at the battle of Brecon in 1093, Brecon Castle was established at the confluence of the Usk and Honddu rivers as the administrative centre of the new Norman lordship of Brecon. The death of Rhys ap Tewdwr was a watershed moment — the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recorded that after it the French held the land of Wales. Brecon grew into a significant priory town as well as a military centre, and the castle remained a prominent feature of the urban landscape throughout the medieval period.

Cardiff Castle · 1081

Norman First Wave

William the Conqueror himself oversaw the construction of the first Cardiff Castle on the site of the Roman fort of Caer Daf in 1081, during his pilgrimage to St Davids — a journey that was as much military reconnaissance as devotion. The great earthwork motte was raised within the Roman walls, which were reused as the outer defences of the new Norman stronghold. Cardiff became the caput of the lordship of Glamorgan under the de Clare family and was progressively rebuilt in stone through the medieval centuries. The Roman walls that still stand within the castle grounds are a direct inheritance from that first Norman seizure of a position the Romans had themselves chosen for its command of the Taff crossing.

Cardigan Castle · c.1110

Norman First Wave

Originally a Norman earthwork castle on the Teifi, Cardigan passed repeatedly between Welsh and Norman hands through the twelfth century before the Lord Rhys took permanent possession in 1165. It was Rhys who held at Cardigan in 1176 the great competitive gathering of poets and musicians that has come to be regarded as the first recorded eisteddfod, proclaiming the event a year in advance throughout Wales and beyond. The stone castle that followed was built and rebuilt through successive Welsh and English ownership. The restored castle in the town centre today stands on the footprint of that history.

Carew Castle · c.1100

Norman First Wave

A Norman stronghold on the tidal Carew river in Pembrokeshire, Carew was established by Gerald de Windsor, constable of Pembroke and husband of the Welsh princess Nest, one of the most celebrated women of twelfth-century Wales. The castle was later transformed into a fortified manor house of considerable elegance by Sir Rhys ap Thomas, the most powerful Welshman of the late fifteenth century, who entertained Henry VII here in 1507 with festivities lasting five days. The adjacent tidal mill, one of the finest surviving examples in Wales, remains operational and reflects the economic as well as military importance of the site.

Castell Glas / Greenfield Castle Ebboth · c.1100

Norman First Wave

A Norman earthwork castle in the Gaer community of Newport in Gwent, its earthwork remains largely obscured by later development. The site, known locally as Castell Glas, offers evidence of the Norman penetration of the Usk valley in the decades following the Conquest, one of the minor but essential secondary fortifications that supported the major castles of the region. The Ordnance Survey grid reference ST302858 locates it precisely for those who wish to find what little remains.

Castell Nos Motte · c.1100

Norman First Wave

A motte and bailey castle in the upland margins of the Vale of Glamorgan, Castell Nos was one of the chain of earthwork fortifications established by the de Clare lords as they consolidated their grip on the lowland zone of Glamorgan and reached toward the Welsh uplands beyond. The name — night castle — carries a resonance that the dry record of the earthwork does not. These advance castles on the upland edge were uncomfortable, isolated postings for small Norman garrisons in a landscape that was emphatically not yet theirs.

Chepstow Castle · 1067

Norman First Wave

The oldest surviving post-Roman stone secular building in Britain, Chepstow was begun by William FitzOsbern, Earl of Hereford, in 1067, the year after the Conquest and only months after Hastings. FitzOsbern chose the limestone cliff above the lowest crossing of the Wye with absolute strategic clarity — whoever held Chepstow held the gateway into south Wales. The great hall he built in stone from the outset, abandoning the usual Norman timber-first approach, was a statement of permanence and ambition. Chepstow was added to by every major lord who held it across the following two centuries, becoming one of the most complex and historically layered castle structures in Wales. Henry Marten, one of the regicides who signed Charles I's death warrant, was imprisoned in the tower that still bears his name.

Coity Castle · c.1100

Norman First Wave

A Norman castle in mid-Glamorgan founded by Payn de Turberville, Coity passed to the Gamage family through marriage and remained in their possession for centuries. Its substantial stone remains — a twelfth-century keep, inner ward, and outer bailey developed through several building phases — represent one of the better-preserved smaller castle complexes of medieval Glamorgan. The de Turbervilles were among the most active of the Norman lords of Glamorgan and their name survives in Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles, drawn from the same family.

Dinerth Castle · c.1110

Norman First Wave

A Norman motte castle in Ceredigion, Dinerth was one of the advance fortifications planted in the Welsh heartland during the first great Norman thrust westward along the coast of Cardigan Bay. It changed hands frequently, a frontier castle in the truest sense, controlled by whoever was currently in the ascendant in the long struggle for Ceredigion between the Welsh princes and the Norman lords. The earthworks survive on their ridge above the coastal plain.

Dinham Castle · c.1100

Norman First Wave

A motte and bailey castle near Raglan in Monmouthshire, one of the secondary fortifications of the Norman lordship of Usk controlling the approach routes from the south into the uplands of Gwent. The de Dinham family gave their name to the castle and to Dinham in the neighbouring county of Herefordshire, their lordship straddling the border in the typical fashion of the Norman marcher lords.

Dyserth Castle · c.1241

Norman First Wave

A castle of the English crown on a limestone crag in Flintshire, built by Henry III to anchor the northern end of his control of the Clwyd valley during a period of renewed English pressure on the Welsh territories of the north-east. It was captured and thoroughly slighted by Llywelyn ap Gruffudd in 1263 following the collapse of Henry III's position in Wales, and was never rebuilt. The crag it occupied still rises above the village of Dyserth, the site now occupied only by a waterfall and the memory of what stood there.

Fonmon Castle · c.1100

Norman First Wave

A Norman castle in the Vale of Glamorgan that evolved through the medieval centuries into a manor house and has remained in continuous habitation for nine hundred years, Fonmon is one of the few medieval Welsh castles still used as a family home. The Jones family, who acquired it in the seventeenth century, have maintained it ever since. The medieval fabric survives within the later house, and the grounds are among the most beautiful in Glamorgan. A castle that has never been abandoned tells a different kind of history from one that was slighted and left to ruin.

Grosmont Castle · c.1201

Norman First Wave

One of the Three Castles of Gwent — along with Skenfrith and White Castle — Grosmont guards the northern approach from the Monnow valley into the mountains of Gwent. Originally an earthwork castle, it was rebuilt in stone by Hubert de Burgh in the early thirteenth century as part of his comprehensive development of the Three Castles as a coherent defensive system. Grosmont saw significant action in Owain Glyndŵr's revolt when it was attacked and briefly held by Welsh forces in 1405 before Prince Henry recaptured it. The substantial ruins, managed by Cadw, retain their great hall range and towers in considerable completeness.

Hawarden Castle (Old) · c.1073

Norman First Wave

The original castle at Hawarden was established by the Normans in the 1070s to command the northern approach to the Welsh border along the Dee estuary. Rebuilt in stone, it was famously captured by Dafydd ap Gruffudd on Palm Sunday 1282 in a surprise night attack that killed its constable and sparked the final Welsh revolt against English rule — the revolt that ended with Llywelyn ap Gruffudd's death later that year and the permanent conquest of Wales by Edward I. The circular keep and parts of the curtain wall survive on their motte within the grounds of the later nineteenth-century mansion associated with Prime Minister Gladstone.

Kenfig Castle · c.1140

Norman First Wave

A Norman castle in Glamorgan that was gradually overwhelmed by the encroaching sand dunes that also buried the medieval borough of Kenfig, one of the most melancholy landscape stories in Wales. The town of Kenfig was a prosperous Norman borough with a market, a guild merchant, and a substantial population. By the fifteenth century the sand had defeated it entirely, burying streets, houses, and eventually the castle itself. The ruins of the castle remain partially visible within the Kenfig National Nature Reserve, emerging from the dunes like something from a Welsh Pompeii.

Kidwelly Castle · 1106

Norman First Wave

Founded by Roger, Bishop of Salisbury, in 1106 on a commanding ridge above the Gwendraeth estuary, Kidwelly was one of the most formidable Norman strongholds in west Wales. The Welsh princess Gwenllian, wife of Gruffudd ap Rhys, was beheaded near its walls in 1136 after leading an army against it in her husband's absence — an act of resistance that became one of the defining moments of Welsh national memory. The great gatehouse and concentric walls developed over the following two centuries into one of the finest castle complexes in Wales, its four round towers and inner and outer wards a textbook of medieval military architecture. The field where Gwenllian fell is still called Maes Gwenllian.

Laugharne Castle · c.1116

Norman First Wave

A Norman stronghold on the Taf estuary in Carmarthenshire, Laugharne was established to command the tidal crossing and the sea approach to Carmarthen. The Lord Rhys took it in 1189 and it changed hands several more times before passing to the English crown. The later stone castle was transformed in the sixteenth century by Sir John Perrot into an Elizabethan mansion of considerable grandeur, its great hall windows overlooking the estuary. The town of Laugharne is also celebrated as the home of Dylan Thomas, who lived and wrote in the boathouse on the estuary shore within sight of the castle walls.

Llandovery Castle · c.1116

Norman First Wave

A Norman castle in the upper Tywi valley, Llandovery was one of the frontier fortifications pushing into the Welsh heartland of Deheubarth. It changed hands repeatedly between Welsh and Norman lords across the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, each change of possession reflecting the shifting fortunes of the struggle for south-west Wales. The earthwork mound and fragmentary stone remains overlook the market town that grew in the castle's shadow, and a statue of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd Fychan — executed at Llandovery by Henry IV in 1401 for supporting Owain Glyndŵr — stands in the town square as a reminder that this ground was contested long after the Norman first wave had passed.

Loughor Castle · c.1106

Norman First Wave

Built directly on the site of the Roman fort of Leucarum, Loughor Castle commanded the crossing of the Loughor estuary at the western end of Gower, the point where the road from Carmarthen entered the Gower peninsula. The Norman tower survives on its Roman earthwork base, the medieval structure rising from foundations that the Romans themselves had chosen for exactly the same strategic reason — control of the tidal crossing. The relationship between Roman and Norman military thinking, separated by six centuries, is nowhere more plainly legible than at Loughor.

Manorbier Castle · c.1095

Norman First Wave

The birthplace around 1146 of Gerald of Wales, the most vivid and observant writer of twelfth-century Britain, Manorbier is one of the finest and best-preserved Norman castles in west Wales. Gerald himself described it with unashamed affection as the pleasantest spot in Wales, praising its position above a tidal inlet, its fishponds, orchards, and gardens. The walls and towers stand to near-full height, the great hall range is largely intact, and the castle retains a completeness rare among Welsh medieval structures. To walk its walls is to occupy the same space that Gerald occupied as a boy, looking out at the same sea.

Mold Castle · c.1100

Norman First Wave

A motte castle established at the northern end of the Clwydian Range, the earthworks of which survive in the town centre of Mold in Flintshire. The site controlled the approach to the Alun valley and the routes toward the Dee, a position of significance in the Norman attempt to establish a permanent presence in the debatable territories of the north Welsh borderland. Owain Gwynedd attacked and burnt the Norman settlement at Mold in 1144 in one of the more dramatic Welsh counter-strikes of the twelfth century.

Monmouth Castle · c.1067

Norman First Wave

One of the earliest Norman castles in Wales, founded by William FitzOsbern within a year of the Conquest on the peninsula formed by the confluence of the Monnow and Wye rivers. Monmouth became the administrative centre of a great marcher lordship and was the birthplace of King Henry V in September 1387, a fact the town has celebrated ever since. The round tower of the great tower and the remains of the hall block survive within a site that remained militarily significant into the Civil War. Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose History of the Kings of Britain invented so much of the Arthurian legend and shaped the image of Wales for centuries, took his name from this town.

Narberth Castle · c.1116

Norman First Wave

A Norman castle in Pembrokeshire whose site is associated in Welsh legend with the opening branch of the Mabinogion, where Pwyll, Lord of Dyfed, sits on the magical mound of Gorsedd Arberth and receives the supernatural encounter that sets the entire narrative in motion. Arberth is Narberth. The later stone castle, a substantial ruin of the thirteenth century, stands in the town on the same elevated ground from which the legend unfolds. Few castle sites in Wales carry so direct a connection to the great narrative literature of the Welsh tradition.

Neath Castle · c.1130

Norman First Wave

Founded by Richard de Granville, the lord who also founded Neath Abbey nearby, Neath Castle controlled the lower Neath valley and the tidal approach from Swansea Bay. The castle was rebuilt as a substantial stone stronghold through the thirteenth century, its twin-towered gatehouse — which remains the principal surviving feature — built to a standard that reflects the prosperity of the lordship. The proximity of the Cistercian abbey to the castle is a reminder that Norman settlement in Wales was a twin process of military occupation and ecclesiastical foundation, each reinforcing the other.

Nevern Castle · c.1108

Norman First Wave

An earthwork castle at Nevern in north Pembrokeshire, raised on a site where a Welsh stronghold had existed before the Normans arrived. The Norman castle was built by Robert FitzMartin and remained in his family's possession until the Lord Rhys seized it in 1191 and gave it to his son Maelgwn. The village of Nevern is remarkable beyond its castle — its church of St Brynach retains a tenth-century Celtic cross of the first importance, its yew avenue is among the oldest in Wales, and the bleeding yew that drips red resin from its wound has accumulated its own body of local legend.

Newcastle Castle, Bridgend · c.1104

Norman First Wave

A Norman ringwork castle in Bridgend whose twelfth-century round tower is one of the earliest cylindrical towers in Wales, its architectural ambition suggesting a lord who wanted something more permanent and impressive than the usual earthwork from the outset. The castle controlled the crossing of the Ogmore river and the western approach to the Vale of Glamorgan. Its Arabic-influenced decorative stonework on the gateway arch has attracted considerable scholarly attention as evidence of the cosmopolitan architectural influences reaching Wales through the network of Norman lordship.

Newcastle Emlyn Castle · c.1240

Norman First Wave

Founded by Maredudd ap Rhys, a Welsh lord of Deheubarth, on a dramatic loop of the Teifi river in Ceredigion, Newcastle Emlyn was from the outset a castle of the Welsh princes rather than a purely Norman imposition. It passed between Welsh and English hands through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries before becoming one of the last castles to hold out for Owain Glyndŵr in the early fifteenth century. The ruins that survive above the river bend are fragmentary but their position is spectacular, the Teifi completing nearly a full circle around the castle rock.

Ogmore Castle · c.1106

Norman First Wave

A Norman ringwork and later stone castle controlling the ford and later the stepping stones across the Ogmore river, built by William de Londres as part of the Norman penetration of the Vale of Glamorgan westward from Cardiff. The stepping stones that cross the Ewenny at Ogmore are still used today, the same crossing that the castle was built to control nine centuries ago. The keep, curtain walls, and remains of the domestic buildings survive in the care of Cadw, set in water-meadows beside the river in a landscape of considerable tranquillity.

Old Beaupre Castle · c.1300

Norman First Wave

A fortified manor house in the Vale of Glamorgan developed by the Basset family through the late medieval period into a comfortable residential complex of considerable architectural interest. Its finest feature is the Renaissance porch of the early sixteenth century, one of the most elaborate pieces of decorative stonework in Wales, bearing the Basset arms and a date of 1586. Old Beaupre stands in a quiet field approached by a farm track, its Elizabethan sophistication in unlikely contrast to the rural simplicity of its setting.

Pembroke Castle · 1093

Norman First Wave

The greatest Norman castle in west Wales and one of the most powerful in Britain, Pembroke was founded by Roger de Montgomery in 1093 at the tip of the long limestone ridge above the Pembroke river. Its great cylindrical keep — built around 1200 by William Marshal, the most celebrated knight of the age — remains one of the finest in Britain, its walls sixteen feet thick at the base and its summit commanding views across the whole of south Pembrokeshire. Beneath the castle a natural cave, the Wogan, opens directly onto the river and provided a water gate for the garrison. Henry VII was born here in January 1457 and Pembroke Castle can fairly claim to be the birthplace of the Tudor dynasty.

Pembridge Castle · c.1200

Norman First Wave

A small but well-preserved castle on the Welsh border in Herefordshire, Pembridge formed part of the chain of fortifications guarding the Golden Valley approach from England into Wales. Its round tower, gatehouse, and curtain wall form an intimate fortified complex that has survived largely intact, the castle never having been thoroughly slighted or comprehensively rebuilt. It remains in private ownership and retains the character of a working border castle in a way that larger and more famous sites sometimes lose.

Penhow Castle · c.1070

Norman First Wave

Claimed as the oldest continuously inhabited castle in Wales, Penhow in Monmouthshire was built by the de St Maur family in the Norman period and has been continuously occupied and adapted over nine centuries, its current form incorporating the Norman tower within a complex of later medieval and post-medieval additions. The St Maur family's name eventually evolved into Seymour, and the family's descendants include Jane Seymour, third wife of Henry VIII. The castle was meticulously restored in the twentieth century and is open to visitors.

Penlle'r Castell · c.1252

Norman First Wave

A remote upland castle on the common above Cwmllynfell at the head of the Swansea valley, Penlle'r Castell is associated with the de Breos lordship of Gower and stands at over 450 metres above sea level, one of the highest castle sites in Wales. Its exposed position made it a difficult garrison in any season and its history is correspondingly obscure. The earthwork remains are substantial but the stonework has largely been robbed. The walk to reach it across the open common is itself a kind of statement about the ambition and the difficulty of medieval lordship in the Welsh uplands.

Pennard Castle · c.1116

Norman First Wave

A Norman castle on the Gower Peninsula that was overwhelmed by wind-blown sand in the later medieval period, sharing the fate of Kenfig to the east. Its ruins stand within the dune system above Three Cliffs Bay, one of the most beautiful coastal landscapes in south Wales, the castle walls emerging from the sand at the edge of the cliff above the bay. The combination of ruined masonry, sand dunes, and the arc of Three Cliffs Bay below makes Pennard one of the most visually dramatic castle sites in Wales, its desolation entirely the work of natural forces rather than human conflict.

Penrhos Castle · c.1150

Norman First Wave

An earthwork castle near Raglan in Monmouthshire, Penrhos was one of the minor fortifications associated with the Norman penetration of central Gwent, supporting the major castles of the region in maintaining control of the road network and the river crossings of the Usk valley. The earthworks survive in a rural setting, one of many such minor sites across the march whose local significance was real even if their historical profile remains slight.

Prestatyn Castle · c.1073

Norman First Wave

A Norman motte castle at Prestatyn commanding the northern end of Offa's Dyke and the coastal route along the north Wales shore between Chester and the Clwyd valley. It was destroyed by Owain Gwynedd in 1167 in one of the most decisive Welsh counter-strikes of the twelfth century, when Owain drove the Norman advance back along the entire northern coast. The earthwork mound survives in the town of Prestatyn, its former military dominance of the coastal corridor now entirely surrounded by twentieth-century development.

Rhayader Castle · c.1177

Norman First Wave

A castle of the Welsh lords of Rhwng Gwy a Hafren later claimed by the English crown, Rhayader Castle in the upper Wye valley was the principal fortification of the upland region between the Wye and Severn rivers. The castle was destroyed by Llywelyn ap Iorwerth in 1231 and never rebuilt to its former status. The site in the centre of the town of Rhayader has been built over, but the castle's role as the administrative centre of a disputed upland territory is well documented in the records of both Welsh and English governance.

Ruperra Motte · c.1100

Norman First Wave

A Norman motte in the hills above Caerphilly, the earthwork predecessor of the later Ruperra Castle built by the Morgan family in the early seventeenth century. The motte represents the initial Norman footprint in this upland area above the Rhymney valley, one of the minor castles establishing Norman presence in the transitional zone between the settled lowlands of Glamorgan and the Welsh uplands beyond.

St Illtyd's Motte · c.1100

Norman First Wave

An earthwork castle mound near Llantwit Major in the Vale of Glamorgan, raised in territory long associated with the memory of St Illtyd, the great sixth-century monk whose monastic community at Llantwit Major was one of the principal centres of early Christian learning in Wales. The Norman motte asserted military control over ground already made sacred by six centuries of association with the saint. The proximity of military and ecclesiastical power in the Norman world was never accidental.

Tomen Ddreiniog · c.1100

Norman First Wave

A motte castle on the Llŷn Peninsula in north-west Wales, one of the earthwork fortifications marking the Norman attempt to project power into the remoter reaches of Gwynedd — an advance that proved beyond Norman capacity to sustain. The princes of Gwynedd reclaimed the Llŷn decisively in the twelfth century and Tomen Ddreiniog, like many similar advance castles, became a monument to the limits of Norman ambition rather than its success.

Tomen Las Castle Mound · c.1100

Norman First Wave

An earthwork mound in Merionethshire, part of the scatter of Norman advance fortifications in the Welsh interior that were established briefly in the years of maximum Norman confidence before Welsh resistance reclaimed the upland territories. The mound survives as a scheduled monument, its green profile on the hillside the only visible record of a Norman presence that lasted perhaps a generation before being swept away.

WELSH · Tomen y Faerdre · c.1100

Norman First Wave

A motte in the Vale of Glamorgan whose Welsh name — the mound of the steward's house — suggests it may have been constructed by or for Welsh lords administering their own territory, rather than purely as a Norman imposition. The faerdre was the administrative centre of a Welsh bond township, the place where renders were collected and justice dispensed. A Welsh lord building a motte to defend his administrative centre was adopting Norman military technology for entirely Welsh purposes.

WELSH · Tomen-y-Bala · c.1100

Norman First Wave

The motte at Bala in Merionethshire commands the outflow of Llyn Tegid, the largest natural lake in Wales, and the valley route that follows the Dee northward toward the border. Associated with Welsh lordship before the Norman period, it passed into wider contention between Welsh and English powers in the later twelfth century as the struggle for Penllyn intensified. The motte survives in the town of Bala, its earthwork profile incongruous among the Georgian and Victorian streets that surround it.

Twthill Castle, Old Rhuddlan · 1073

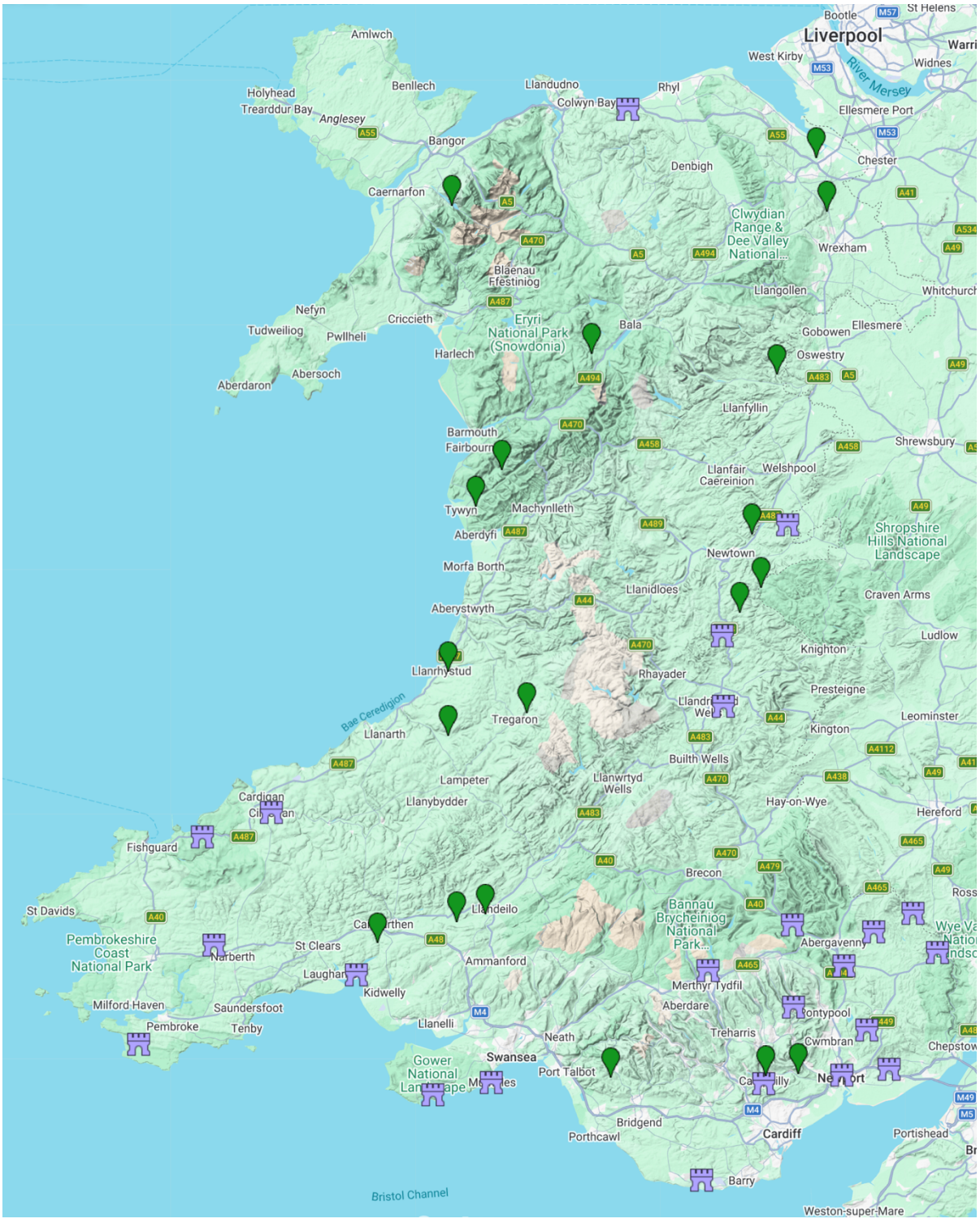
Norman First Wave

The original Norman castle at Rhuddlan, built by Robert of Rhuddlan in 1073 as an earth-and-timber motte on the ridge above the Clwyd, was the predecessor of Edward I's great concentric stone castle built two centuries later on lower ground beside the river. Robert of Rhuddlan was one of the most aggressive of the Norman advance commanders in north Wales, pushing deep into Gwynedd before being killed and beheaded by the fleet of Gruffudd ap Cynan in 1093. The Twthill motte survives as a scheduled monument beside the later castle, the two fortifications reading together as two centuries of English ambition on the same stretch of river.

WELSH FORTRESSES THROUGH TIME

A Companion Document

LAYER 5 — WELSH AND NORMAN CONSOLIDATION 1150 TO 1240 AD



By the middle of the twelfth century the pattern of Wales had been established but not settled. The Normans held the coastal lowlands, the Vale of Glamorgan, the Pembrokeshire plain, and the river valleys of the south-east. The Welsh held the uplands, the west, and the north. Neither side had achieved the decisive victory that would end the contest. What followed was a long period of consolidation on both sides, each building more permanent and more sophisticated defences, each developing the castle from an earthwork refuge into a stone expression of permanent power.

The Welsh princes of this period were not merely reactive. Under the Lord Rhys of Deheubarth, who dominated the second half of the twelfth century, and under Llywelyn ap Iorwerth of Gwynedd, who dominated the first half of the thirteenth, the Welsh built their own stone castles, founded their own boroughs, issued their own charters, and negotiated as near-equals with the English crown. Llywelyn ap Iorwerth — Llywelyn the Great — married Joan, the illegitimate daughter of King John, received the homage of the other Welsh lords, and governed a political entity that was recognisably a principality rather than a collection of competing kingdoms. His castles — Castell y Bere, Dolbadarn, Dolforwyn — were built in stone with a confidence that matched any Norman lord.

The Norman response was Caerphilly — the largest castle in Wales, the most elaborate water defence system in Britain, built by Gilbert de Clare in 1268 as a direct answer to Llywelyn ap Gruffudd's southward expansion. Caerphilly did not just defend the Clare lordship. It set a new standard for what a castle could be, and Edward I was paying attention. The forty-two sites on this layer map the full complexity of this period of consolidation — Welsh castles and Norman castles, great fortresses and minor earthworks, episcopal palaces and merchants' bridges, all built in the same century of contested but increasingly sophisticated power.

Caerphilly Castle · 1268

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

The largest castle in Wales and the second largest in Britain after Windsor, Caerphilly was begun by Gilbert de Clare in 1268 in direct response to the rising power of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, whose southward expansion threatened the Clare lordship of Glamorgan. De Clare's solution was architectural on a scale that had never been attempted in Wales before — a concentric castle surrounded by an elaborate system of artificial lakes and dam platforms that turned the low ground around the castle into a vast water defence. The north dam alone is three hundred metres long. The inner ward, with its four great round towers and twin gatehouses, was the template for Edward I's Iron Ring castles that would follow. Llywelyn never took it. No one ever took it by storm.

WELSH · Carndochan Castle · c.1250

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Welsh castle of the princes of Gwynedd on a rocky crag above the southern end of Llyn Tegid near Bala, Carndochan was built to assert Welsh control of the Bala gateway into the upland territory of Penllyn. Its construction on a dramatic natural crag is entirely characteristic of the Welsh approach to castle-building — using the landscape itself as the primary defence, with masonry added where the natural rock provided insufficient protection. The site rewards the steep approach with views across the lake and the surrounding uplands that make the strategic reasoning immediately apparent.

WELSH · Castell Cynfael · c.1150

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Welsh castle in the Dyfi valley region of Merionethshire, Castell Cynfael is associated with the princes of Gwynedd and the control of the Dyfi crossing and its valley route between north and south Wales. The Dyfi valley was a strategic corridor of the first importance in medieval Wales, forming both a natural boundary and a communications route that whoever controlled mid-Wales needed to command.

WELSH · Castell Meredydd, Machen · c.1200

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Welsh castle in the Rhymney valley above Machen in Gwent, held by the Welsh lords of Gwynllŵg before the territory was absorbed into the Norman lordship of Glamorgan. The castle sits on a spur above the valley and commands the approach routes from the south into the uplands. Its Welsh construction in a territory under constant Norman pressure from the Clare lords of Glamorgan reflects the determination of the native lords to maintain their position in a landscape being steadily enclosed by Norman power.

WELSH · Castell Moel · c.1200

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Welsh castle in west Wales associated with the lesser lordships that survived in the interstices between the major Norman marcher territories, Castell Moel represents the lower tier of native Welsh castle provision — smaller in scale than the great princely fortresses of Gwynedd but performing the same function of asserting territorial control and providing a defended refuge for the lord and his household.

WELSH · Castell Morgraig · c.1267

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Welsh-built castle on the ridge above Lisvane north of Cardiff, Castell Morgraig was probably constructed by the lords of Senghenydd in the 1260s as Welsh power in the region reasserted itself under the protection of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd. Its unfinished state and apparent abandonment before completion may reflect the swift reversal that followed — the de Clare advance of 1267 to 1268 that swept Welsh power from Glamorgan and was immediately followed by the construction of Caerphilly. Castell Morgraig was begun when Welsh confidence was at its height in Glamorgan. It was abandoned when that confidence evaporated.

Castell Taliorum (Tal-y-rhiw) · c.1300

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A small fortification in Glamorgan associated with the lesser manorial lords of the region, Castell Taliorum represents the lowest tier of castle provision in the settled Norman territories of the Vale — a defended manor house rather than a military stronghold in the full sense, its earthwork remains reflecting the modest ambitions and resources of its builders compared with the great Clare and de Braose castles that dominated the landscape around it.

Castell Tinboeth · c.1276

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A castle of the lords of Elfael in Radnorshire, built on a prominent crag above the Ithon valley, Castell Tinboeth commanded the approaches through one of the most contested upland territories in the Welsh march. Its construction in stone reflects the intensification of castle-building in the central marches during the thirteenth century as both Welsh and English lords invested in permanent stone structures to replace the earthwork castles of the first Norman wave. The crag on which it stands is striking enough to make its strategic purpose immediately clear.

WELSH · Castell Trefilan · c.1170

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Welsh castle in Ceredigion associated with the native lords of that territory during the period of Welsh resurgence under the Lord Rhys and his successors. Ceredigion was one of the territories most fiercely contested between Welsh and Norman power across the twelfth century, and the castles of its Welsh lords reflect the determination to assert native sovereignty over a landscape that the Normans had temporarily occupied but never permanently settled.

WELSH · Castell y Bere · 1221

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

Built by Llywelyn ap Iorwerth in 1221 in the Dysynni valley below Cadair Idris, Castell y Bere is the most distinctively Welsh in character of all the native stone castles. Where the Normans favoured round towers on flat or gently sloping ground, Llywelyn's builders adapted their design entirely to the rocky ridge the castle occupies — D-shaped towers, an apsidal southern tower, the curtain wall following the natural contours of the rock with an organic quality entirely absent from the geometric Norman approach. It was the last Welsh castle to fall in the war of 1282 to 1283, taken by Edward I's forces in April 1283 after a brief siege. Its remoteness in the Dysynni valley has preserved both the ruins and the silence around them.

WELSH · Castell-y-Blaidd · c.1200

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Welsh castle on the upland rim of Radnorshire, the name meaning the castle of the wolf, Castell-y-Blaidd commanded the approaches through the upland territory of Rhwng Gwy a Hafren, the contested region between the Wye and Severn rivers. Its remote position on the edge of the open hill reflects the character of this disputed territory — neither firmly Welsh nor firmly Norman, passed between competing powers across two centuries of marcher politics.

Castlemartin Castle · c.1200

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Norman castle in south Pembrokeshire controlling the fertile limestone plateau of the Castlemartin peninsula, one of the most productive agricultural landscapes in medieval Wales and a cornerstone of the Anglo-Norman settlement of south Pembrokeshire that would make this part of Wales the little England beyond Wales it remains in character today. The site now lies within the Castlemartin military training area, its earthworks preserved by the same restricted access that has limited their investigation.

Castle Arnold (Arnallt) · c.1150

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A castle of the de Cantilupe lords in the march of Gwent, Castle Arnold was one of the secondary fortifications supporting the greater castles of the eastern march in maintaining the network of Norman control across the Gwent landscape. The de Cantilupe family were significant marcher lords whose interests stretched across Herefordshire and Gwent, and their castles reflect the dense layering of Norman military provision in this well-settled border territory.

Cefnllys Castle · c.1240

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A castle of the Mortimer lords on a spur above the Ithon river in Radnorshire, Cefnllys was established during the period of intensive castle-building in the central marches that characterised the mid-thirteenth century. The earthworks of two successive castles survive on the headland above the river — the earlier Norman motte replaced by a more substantial stone structure as the Mortimers consolidated their grip on Maelienydd. The borough that grew below the castle was one of several planted towns in the march that failed to grow beyond their medieval dimensions, leaving Cefnllys as a castle and church in fields rather than a market town.

Cilgerran Castle · c.1223

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

Dramatically positioned on a rocky headland above the Teifi gorge in Ceredigion, Cilgerran was the scene of one of the most celebrated incidents in twelfth-century Welsh history — the abduction of Nest, the Welsh princess and wife of Gerald de Windsor, by Owain ap Cadwgan in 1109, an episode that sparked a years-long feud and became one of the most retold stories in the chronicles. The stone castle that stands today was built after William Marshal the Younger recaptured the site from the Welsh in 1223, its twin round towers above the gorge among the most photographed images in Welsh heritage. Turner painted it twice.

Crickhowell Castle · c.1272

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A castle of the de Turberville and later Pauncefote lords in the upper Usk valley, Crickhowell takes its English name from the Iron Age hillfort of Crug Hywel that dominates the skyline above the town. The twin-towered gatehouse and shell keep occupy the mound from which the town of Crickhowell was governed through the medieval centuries. The substantial remains of the twin towers survive in the town centre, their masonry giving a clear impression of the scale of the original castle despite centuries of stone robbing.

WELSH · Dinefwr Castle · c.1163

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

The ancient seat of the kings of Deheubarth, Dinefwr Castle was the principal stronghold of the Lord Rhys and his successors, the centre of the most powerful Welsh kingdom of the late twelfth century. The Lord Rhys built or rebuilt the stone castle on its crag above the Tywi valley and from here governed a territory stretching across most of south-west Wales. The great round keep that commands the valley is one of the finest surviving examples of Welsh castle architecture. Dinefwr remained in Welsh hands longer than almost any other major castle — it was not finally taken by the English until 1277. The castle sits within the Newton House parkland, managed by the National Trust, its crag above the deer park one of the defining images of the Tywi valley.

WELSH · Dolbadarn Castle · c.1220

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

Built by Llywelyn ap Iorwerth at the foot of the Llanberis Pass, Dolbadarn's great cylindrical tower is the finest surviving example of a Welsh-built round tower and the iconic image of native Welsh castle architecture. The tower rises from a rocky knoll between two lakes, commanding the pass that was the principal route through Snowdonia from the south. Owain Goch ap Gruffudd was imprisoned here by his brother Llywelyn ap Gruffudd for over twenty years, a dynastic captivity that became one of the defining episodes of the internal politics of Gwynedd. Turner painted Dolbadarn in 1800, and the painting established the castle as one of the great Romantic images of Wales.

WELSH · Dolforwyn Castle · 1273

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

Llywelyn ap Gruffudd began building Dolforwyn Castle at Abermule on the Severn in 1273 against the explicit orders of the English crown, which had forbidden the construction of a new Welsh castle and borough so close to the English-held Montgomery. Llywelyn's defiance in proceeding with the build was one of the most deliberate provocations of his relationship with Edward I and contributed directly to the deterioration that led to the war of 1277. Dolforwyn fell to the English after a brief siege in April 1277, having been held for less than four years. Excavation of the site in the 1980s and 1990s revealed the full plan of what Llywelyn had been building — a castle and planned town that, had the politics gone differently, might have become one of the principal centres of an independent Welsh state.

WELSH · Dryslwyn Castle · c.1220

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Welsh castle of the lords of Deheubarth on a prominent hill above the Tywi valley, Dryslwyn was the scene of one of the most dramatic sieges of the late thirteenth century. In 1287 an English force besieging the castle dug a mine beneath one of the towers to bring it down. The mine collapsed prematurely, killing a large number of the besiegers including several men of high rank. Despite this catastrophe the siege continued and Dryslwyn fell. The excavated remains are now presented within an interpretive landscape that allows the full circuit of the castle to be traced on its hill above the river.

East Orchard Castle · c.1280

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A minor castle of the Vale of Glamorgan lords, East Orchard represents the lowest tier of Norman castle provision in the settled coastal plain of Glamorgan — a manorial fortification rather than a strategic

stronghold, its earthwork remains the modest evidence of a local lord asserting his status within the hierarchical landscape of the Norman march.

WELSH · Ewloe Castle · c.1210

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Welsh castle in Flintshire hidden in a wooded dell near Hawarden, Ewloe was built by the princes of Gwynedd to assert their authority over the disputed territories of Tegeingl in the north-east. Its position in a hollow rather than on high ground is unusual and deliberate — a castle designed to be concealed in the landscape rather than to dominate it, its existence known to those who needed to know and hidden from those who did not. The D-shaped Welsh tower is an early example of the round tower in Welsh native architecture, predating the English conquest of the region by seven decades.

Gwrych Castle · 1819

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A nineteenth-century Gothic Revival mansion near Abergele on the north Wales coast, Gwrych was designed by Lloyd Bamford-Hesketh to appear as a medieval fortress spread along a limestone escarpment above the sea. Despite its Victorian origins it is included for its landscape significance and the extraordinary restoration project currently under way following decades of dereliction. Gwrych became known to a new generation as the location for the 2020 and 2021 series of I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here. The current restoration aims to recover the full circuit of its battlemented walls and towers.

Llansteffan Castle · c.1146

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Norman castle on a headland above the Tywi estuary in Carmarthenshire, Llansteffan commands both the estuary crossing and the sea approach to Carmarthen with a natural authority that made it one of the most fought-over sites in south-west Wales. It was taken by the Lord Rhys in 1146 and again in 1189, and changed hands several more times before English control was permanently established. The walls and towers developed substantially through the thirteenth century and remain in impressive condition, managed by Cadw. The view from the castle gateway across the Tywi to the Gower hills beyond is one of the great estuary prospects of Wales.

WELSH · Llangynwyd Castle · c.1200

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Welsh castle in the upland Llynfi valley above Maesteg, Llangynwyd was associated with the lords of Tir Iarll, the territory of the earl, an upland zone between the Norman lowlands of Glamorgan and the native Welsh uplands beyond. The name reflects the ambiguous character of the territory itself — claimed by the Norman earls of Gloucester but inhabited and in practice governed by Welsh lords who paid nominal homage while maintaining their own culture and legal traditions.

Llangybi Castle (Tregrug Castle) · c.1300

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A castle in Monmouthshire set on a spur commanding the Usk valley approach from the south, Llangybi Castle — also known as Tregrug — was associated with the de Clare lords and their successors in the lordship of Usk. The earthwork and stone remains survive in a rural setting that gives some impression of the castle's original command of the valley route below.

Llawhaden Castle · c.1115

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A fortified palace of the bishops of St Davids, Llawhaden was progressively developed through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries into one of the most comfortable and well-appointed episcopal residences in Wales. The great hall, chapel, gatehouse, and domestic ranges reflect the wealth and administrative importance of the medieval diocese of St Davids, which controlled vast estates across south-west Wales. Bishop Henry de Gower, the great builder of the early fourteenth century who also

transformed the Bishop's Palace at St Davids itself, was responsible for much of what stands at Llawhaden today.

Monnow Bridge and Gate · c.1297

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

The sole surviving fortified bridge gate in Britain, the Monnow Gate at Monmouth spans the Monnow river on its medieval bridge and remains one of the most recognisable medieval structures in Wales. Built around 1297 to control access to the town across the river, the gate tower with its portcullis groove and arrow loops still stands to full height above the bridge it was designed to defend. It is a working part of the modern town — traffic passes through it daily — which gives it a vitality that many more isolated monuments lack.

Montgomery Castle · c.1223

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

Henry III's royal castle at Montgomery, rebuilt in stone from the 1220s on a dramatic rock above the Severn valley town, was the principal English fortress controlling the middle Severn march and the principal point of negotiation between the English crown and the princes of Gwynedd. The Treaty of Montgomery of 1267 was sealed here, recognising Llywelyn ap Gruffudd as Prince of Wales in return for his homage to Henry III — the high-water mark of Welsh political achievement in the medieval period. Ten years later Edward I reversed everything that treaty had established. The castle ruins command the town and the valley in a way that makes its role as the seat of English power in the march immediately legible.

Morlais Castle · c.1288

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A castle built by Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Gloucester, on a ridge above Merthyr Tydfil that he did not have the legal right to fortify, Morlais provoked a serious legal dispute with the Hereford lords over the boundaries of marcher jurisdiction — a dispute that had to be settled by Edward I himself. The ruins of the castle on their windy ridge command one of the most extensive views in south Wales, from the Brecon Beacons to the Bristol Channel. The sheer scale of the earthwork platforms and fragmentary stonework reflects the ambition of a lord who was simultaneously the most powerful magnate in south Wales and sufficiently reckless to build illegally on his neighbour's land.

Newport Castle, Monmouthshire · c.1327

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A castle of the lords of Gwynllŵg on the Usk at Newport, substantially rebuilt in the fourteenth century with a remarkable watergate designed to be accessed directly from the river at high tide. The three towers of the river frontage survive alongside the central hall tower, their reflection in the Usk constituting one of the most atmospheric medieval images in the urban landscape of south Wales. The castle's riverside setting made it both a military stronghold and a commercial gateway, the watergate giving direct access to the quayside trade that was the economic foundation of medieval Newport.

Newport Castle, Pembrokeshire · c.1200

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A castle of the lords of Cemaes on a ridge above the Nevern estuary in north Pembrokeshire, Newport Castle commanded the northern coastal route into the Preseli uplands and the approaches to the Fishguard coast. Its medieval towers have been incorporated into a later house that remains a private residence, giving the castle a continuity of habitation that its ruined neighbours at Nevern and elsewhere lack. The town of Newport below it retains its medieval borough character with unusual completeness.

Oxwich Castle · c.1541

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Tudor fortified manor house on the Gower Peninsula rather than a medieval castle in the strict sense, Oxwich was built by the Rice family in the mid-sixteenth century on the site of an earlier fortification.

Its elaborate porch, mullioned windows, and decorative stonework reflect the Renaissance architectural fashion reaching Wales through the network of gentry connections with the English court. The building is a statement of cultural aspiration as much as defensive provision, a lord demonstrating that he was modern, educated, and connected to the wider world.

Oystermouth Castle · c.1106

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A castle of the lords of Gower above Swansea Bay, Oystermouth was attacked and burned by the Welsh in 1215 and subsequently rebuilt to a much more substantial standard. The thirteenth and fourteenth-century development transformed it into a residence of considerable comfort, its chapel with fine decorated tracery windows one of the most elegant pieces of ecclesiastical architecture in any Welsh castle. The view from its walls across Swansea Bay to the Mumbles headland is as commanding today as it was when the de Braose lords of Gower looked out from the same battlements.

Pencoed Castle · c.1490

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A fortified manor house in Monmouthshire developed by the Morgan family in the late medieval period, Pencoed reflects the transition from purely military to residential castle architecture that characterised Welsh and marcher gentry building in the fifteenth century. The towers and gatehouse retain their defensive character but the overall conception is of a comfortable and impressive house for a prosperous family rather than a military stronghold designed to withstand a siege.

Skenfrith Castle · c.1228

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

One of the Three Castles of Gwent, rebuilt by Hubert de Burgh following his acquisition of the lordship in the 1220s, Skenfrith is the most complete and the most quietly beautiful of the three. Its round keep, curtain walls with corner towers, and water-filled moat survive in a state of near-complete preservation in a village setting beside the Monnow, the whole complex small enough to take in at a glance from the meadow beside the river. The church of St Bridget beside the castle contains the tomb of John de Burgh in his armour, one of the finest medieval effigies in Gwent.

WELSH · Sycharth Castle · c.1250

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

The principal residence of Owain Glyndŵr before his revolt, Sycharth was a moated llys in the Cynllaith valley of north Powys described with glowing admiration by the court poet Iolo Goch in a poem that catalogues its tiled roof, its nine halls, its fish pond, its mill, its orchard, its vineyard, and its lord's legendary generosity. Iolo Goch's poem is one of the finest descriptions of a Welsh lord's residence in the medieval literature, and it was burnt to nothing by Prince Henry in May 1403. Owain never rebuilt it. The earthwork platform of the moated site survives as a scheduled monument, the Cynllaith running beside it as it did when Iolo Goch feasted in the hall above.

White Castle · c.1184

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

The most martial of the Three Castles of Gwent, White Castle — named for the white render that once covered its walls — was transformed by royal investment in the 1180s and again in the 1260s into a formidable concentric fortress. The round towers of the inner ward, the deep water-filled moat, and the hornwork defending the northern approach make White Castle the most purely military of the three, a serious defensive installation rather than a comfortable residence. Standing on its walls in the silence of the Gwent hills, with no village nearby and no modern intrusion visible, White Castle retains its medieval atmosphere more completely than almost any other castle in Wales.

WELSH · Caer Penrhos · c.1149

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Welsh-period defended enclosure in Ceredigion associated with the native lords of that territory during the era of Welsh resurgence under the Lord Rhys and his predecessors. The site commanded

the approach routes through this part of Ceredigion during the period when Welsh power was reasserting itself against the Norman advance, the native lords rebuilding their authority in the landscape with defended sites that matched Norman castle-building with indigenous equivalents.

WELSH · Caergwrle Castle · c.1278

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

Built by Dafydd ap Gruffudd in 1278 on the crag of an Iron Age hillfort above the Alun valley in Flintshire, Caergwrle Castle was one of the last acts of independent Welsh castle-building before the final conquest. When Dafydd rebelled against Edward I in March 1282 — the revolt that cost his brother Llywelyn his life — the English seized Caergwrle and began adapting it for their own use. In 1283, before the work was complete, a fire destroyed the castle and it was abandoned. The ruins on their crag above the village remain one of the most evocative monuments of the final years of Welsh independence.

WELSH · Castell Bryn Amlwyg · c.1257

Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A Welsh castle in the upper Teme valley associated with the princes of Gwynedd's expansion of influence southward through the marcher territories in the mid-thirteenth century, when Llywelyn ap Gruffudd was at the height of his power. Castell Bryn Amlwyg represents the southward reach of Gwynedd power into territory that had previously been contested between multiple Welsh and marcher lords, a physical expression of the political dominance that the Treaty of Montgomery of 1267 would formally recognise.

WELSH · Ystrad Meurig Castle · c.1116

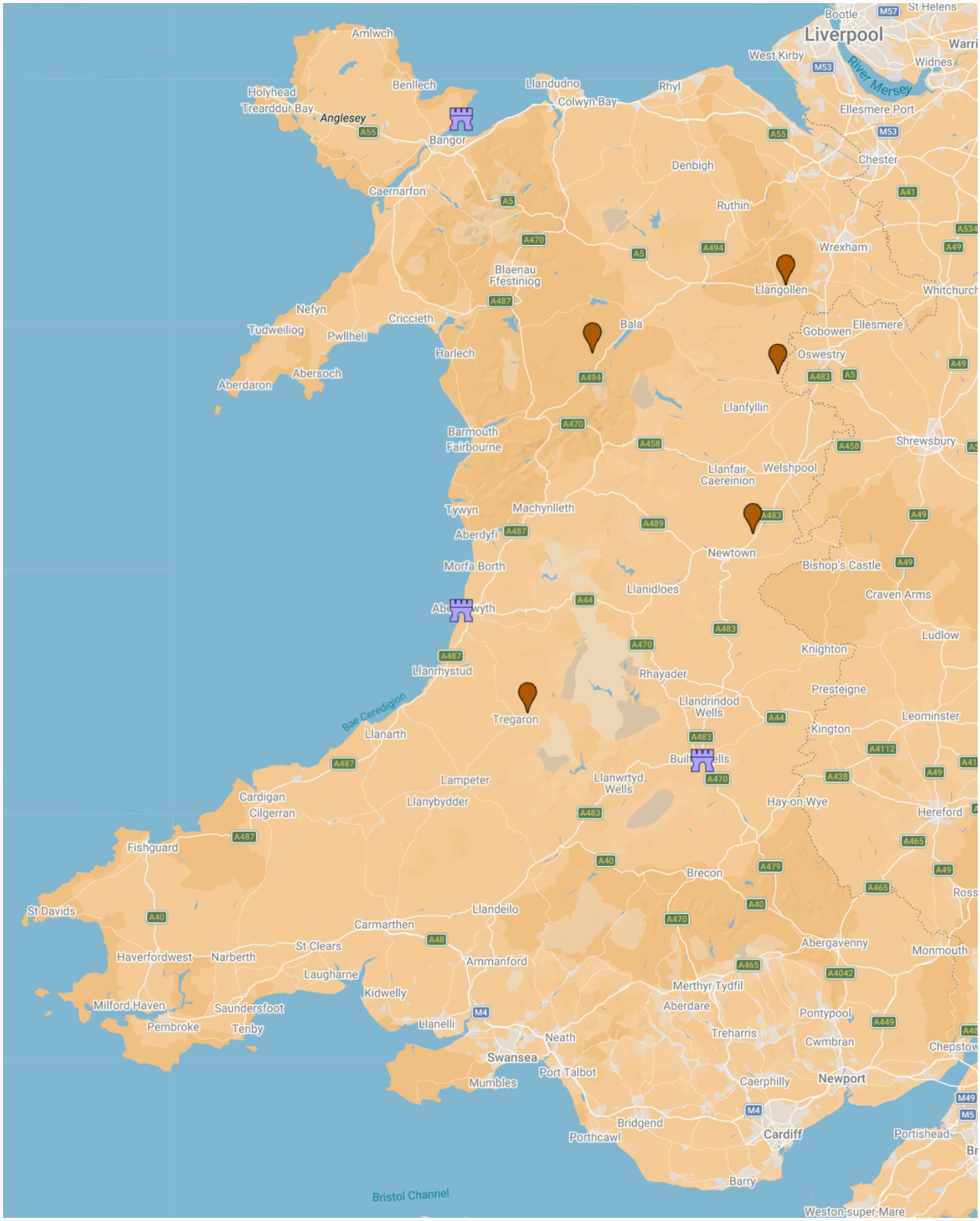
Welsh and Norman Consolidation

A castle of the Welsh lords of Ceredigion at Ystrad Meurig in the upper Teifi valley, controlling the route from the Cardigan Bay coast into the Welsh interior. The site changed hands repeatedly through the twelfth century as Ceredigion was fought over between the native Welsh lords, the Normans, and the expanding kingdom of Gwynedd. Its history spans the full arc of Welsh-Norman conflict in the region, from the first Norman advance into Ceredigion to the final consolidation of Welsh control under the Lord Rhys.

WELSH FORTRESSES THROUGH TIME

A Companion Document

LAYER 6 — AGE OF THE PRINCES 1240 TO 1277 AD



The middle decades of the thirteenth century were the closest Wales ever came to becoming a unified independent state. Under Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, grandson of Llywelyn the Great, the principality of Wales achieved a political coherence that no Welsh ruler before or after would match. By 1258 Llywelyn had received the homage of virtually every Welsh lord. By 1267, through the Treaty of Montgomery, Henry III formally recognised him as Prince of Wales — the first time an English king had acknowledged that title as a legal political reality rather than a personal honorific. Wales was, for a moment, a principality with borders, a government, a chancery, and a prince whose authority over his fellow Welsh lords was recognised in international law.

The castles of this layer are the physical expression of that political achievement and its limits. Llywelyn's castles at Dolforwyn and Carndochan, Dinas Bran above Llangollen, Aberystwyth on its headland, the moated llys at Sycharth — these are the monuments of a Wales that was governing itself, building for permanence, and projecting authority across a landscape it had reclaimed from a generation of Norman advance. They are also the monuments of a political structure that rested on one man's ability to hold together lords who were rivals as much as subjects, and on his relationship with an English crown that had recognised Welsh independence under one king and would revoke it under the next.

Edward I became king in 1272. Within five years everything the Treaty of Montgomery had established was gone. Llywelyn was dead at Cilmeri. His brother Dafydd was hanged, drawn, and quartered at Shrewsbury — the first person in recorded history to suffer that particular death. The Age of the Princes ended not with a negotiated settlement but with an execution. What followed was the Iron Ring.

Aberystwyth Castle · 1277

Age of the Princes

Although the first fortification at Aberystwyth was a Welsh earthwork castle of the Lord Rhys, it was Edward I's new concentric castle of 1277 that defined the site as an instrument of English power on the Cardigan Bay coast. Built to designs overseen by Master James of St George at the beginning of Edward's first Welsh campaign, Aberystwyth anchored the southern end of the coastal strategy that would eventually encircle Gwynedd. Owain Glynŵr captured it in 1404 and held it for four years, making it the seat of his administration for much of the revolt. It was the last of his castles to fall, surrendering to Prince Henry in 1408. The ruins on their headland above the sea remain one of the most atmospheric castle sites in Wales.

Beaumaris Castle · 1295

Age of the Princes

The last and most technically perfect of Edward I's Welsh castles, Beaumaris on the south coast of Anglesey was begun in 1295 following the revolt of Madog ap Llywelyn and never fully completed. Master James of St George designed it as the theoretical ideal of the concentric castle — a perfect symmetry of inner and outer wards, each gate on the outer wall offset from the gate of the inner so that any attacker who breached the outer ward was immediately exposed to fire from the inner. There are no weak points in the design. There never were. The great irony of Beaumaris is that it was never properly tested in war — the castle that solved every problem of medieval military architecture was never given the opportunity to demonstrate its solutions.

Builth Castle · 1277

Age of the Princes

A castle of the English crown at Builth Wells commanding the upper Wye valley, rebuilt by Edward I from 1277 as part of his first campaign to contain and then conquer the principality of Wales. Builth has a dark place in Welsh memory. On 11 December 1282 Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, Prince of Wales, was killed in a skirmish near Cilmeri a few miles from the castle. In the hours before his death he had approached Builth and the garrison had refused him entry — a refusal that has been interpreted ever since as deliberate treachery, though the truth of that moment remains disputed. A monument at Cilmeri marks the place where the last native Prince of Wales fell. The castle earthworks at Builth survive but the stonework is gone.

WELSH · Carndochan Castle · c.1250

Age of the Princes

Built by the princes of Gwynedd to control the head of the Bala valley and the upland territory of Penllyn, Carndochan exemplifies the native Welsh tradition of castle-building on naturally defensive crags. The rock on which it stands rises steeply above the valley floor and the approach from below, and the stonework that completes the defences where the natural rock provides insufficient protection is still clearly traceable. In the period of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd's maximum authority, Carndochan was a statement of Gwynedd's reach into the territories of the lesser Welsh lords who had been brought under Llywelyn's overlordship.

WELSH · Castell Dinas Bran · c.1260

Age of the Princes

The great hilltop castle of the lords of Powys Fadog, Castell Dinas Bran perches on a dramatic conical hill above Llangollen with a visual authority that no photograph quite prepares you for. The castle was built by Gruffudd ap Madog in the 1260s on a site with much earlier prehistoric and early medieval occupation, and its position made it effectively impregnable to direct assault — the hill is steep on every side and the castle crowns its summit. It was never taken by force. When Edward I's forces moved against Powys Fadog in 1277 the Welsh garrison burned the castle themselves rather than allow it to be used against them. The ruins that remain are therefore the ruins of a deliberate destruction, the last act of a garrison that would not surrender what it could not hold.

WELSH · Dolforwyn Castle · 1273

Age of the Princes

Llywelyn ap Gruffudd built Dolforwyn Castle at Abermule on the Severn in 1273 in deliberate defiance of the English crown's prohibition on new Welsh fortifications near the border. The castle and planned borough he was creating would have established a Welsh commercial and military centre directly challenging the English-held Montgomery three miles away. Edward I demanded the work stop. Llywelyn continued. When the war of 1277 came, Dolforwyn was one of the first Welsh castles to fall, taken by an English force under Roger Mortimer after a siege of just over a week. The excavations of the 1980s and 1990s recovered the full plan of Llywelyn's ambition — a substantial stone castle with a planned town below it that was barely begun before the war ended the project permanently.

WELSH · Sycharth Castle · c.1250

Age of the Princes

The moated llys of Owain Glynŵr's family at Sycharth in the Cynllaith valley was the home from which he launched his revolt in 1400 and the residence celebrated by the court poet Iolo Goch as the finest lord's house in Wales — its tiled roof, its nine halls, its fish pond, mill, vineyard, and orchard catalogued with the pride of a poet describing a patron's magnificence. Prince Henry burned it in May 1403. Owain never returned to rebuild it. The earthwork platform of the moated site survives as a scheduled monument in quiet farmland, the Cynllaith running beside it, the silence in absolute contrast to Iolo Goch's vivid picture of a household in full life.

WELSH · Ystrad Meurig Castle · c.1116

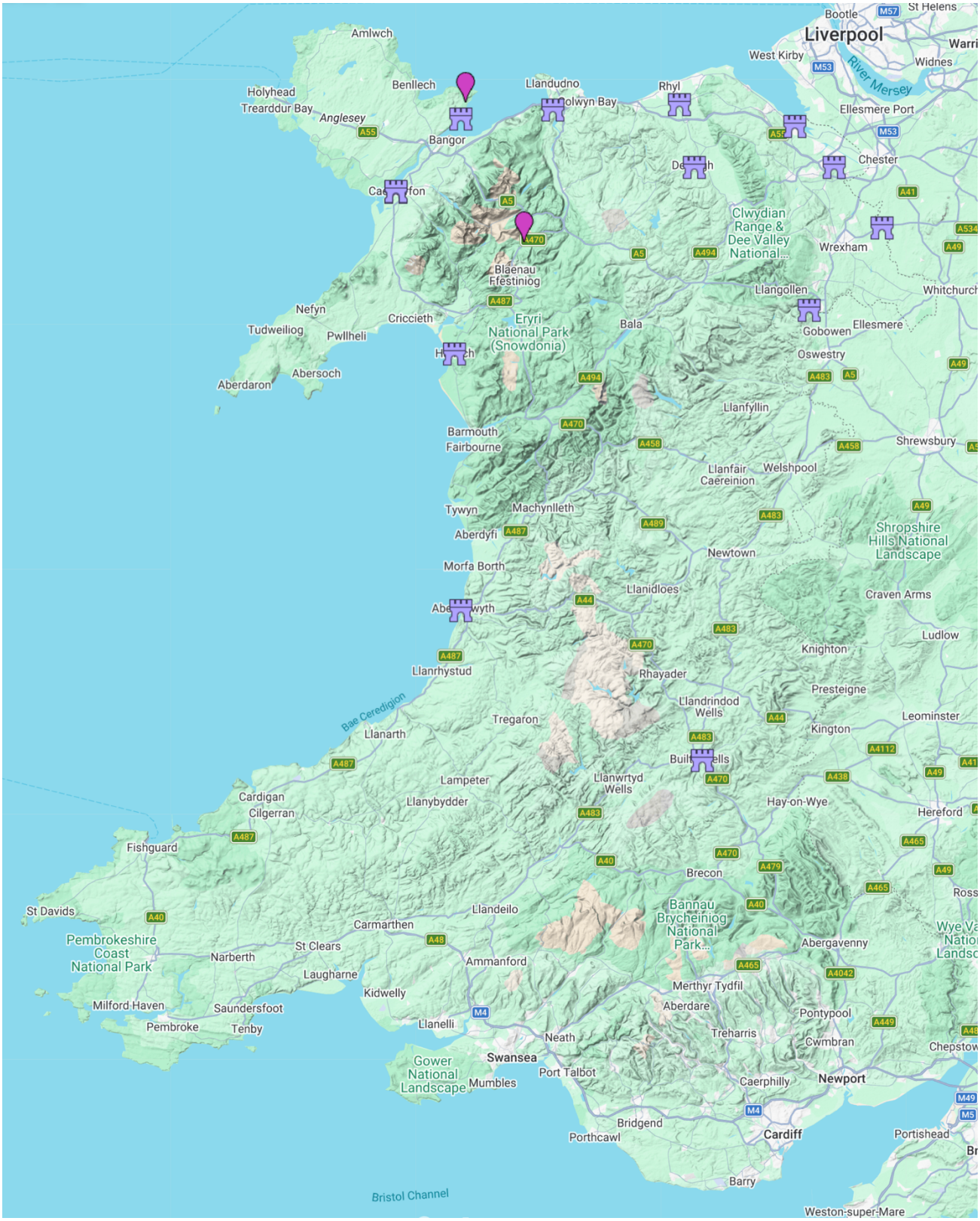
Age of the Princes

A castle of the Welsh lords of Ceredigion at Ystrad Meurig commanding the upper Teifi valley, its history stretches across the full arc of the Age of the Princes. Founded in the early twelfth century, it was contested through the long struggle for Ceredigion before passing finally under the firm control of the Lord Rhys and his Deheubarth successors. Its position controlling the valley route between the Cardigan Bay coast and the Welsh interior gave it a strategic significance that outlasted the particular lords who held it, each generation of Welsh princes understanding its value in exactly the same terms as the generation before.

WELSH FORTRESSES THROUGH TIME

A Companion Document

LAYER 7 — EDWARD I'S IRON RING 1277 TO 1300 AD



Edward, I did not invent the castle. He inherited a tradition of military architecture that had been developing for two centuries across England, France, and the crusader states of the Holy Land. What he did at Wales was apply that tradition with a systematic thoroughness, a financial commitment, and a strategic intelligence that had no precedent in British history. Between 1277 and 1295 he built or substantially rebuilt ten major castles in Wales, planted English boroughs beside each of them, straightened rivers to create navigable supply routes, and imposed a legal framework on the conquered territories that defined their relationship with the English crown for the next two and a half centuries. It was the most concentrated programme of castle-building ever undertaken in the medieval world.

The man who made it possible architecturally was Master James of St George, a Savoyard military architect of genius whom Edward recruited in 1278 following his return from crusade. Master James had seen the great crusader castles of the Holy Land — Krak des Chevaliers, Margat, Beaufort — and had absorbed the lesson that the concentric castle, with its multiple rings of defence and its capacity to be held by a small garrison against a large force, was the highest form of military architecture. At Flint, Rhuddlan, Aberystwyth, Builth, Conwy, Caernarfon, Harlech, and finally Beaumaris he applied that lesson to the Welsh landscape with results that remain extraordinary eight centuries later.

The Iron Ring was not only military. Each castle was accompanied by a planted English borough, its burgesses brought from England and given trading privileges that excluded the Welsh from the new commercial economy of the conquest. Caernarfon, Conwy, Harlech, Beaumaris, Denbigh, Flint, Rhuddlan — each was a colonial town as much as a military fortress, the castle and the borough working together to establish English power in the landscape as a physical, economic, and legal reality. The Welsh were not permitted to trade in the new boroughs, to hold property within the walls, or to bear arms in the streets. The Iron Ring was iron in more than architecture.

Aberystwyth Castle · 1277

Edward I's Iron Ring

Edward I's concentric castle at Aberystwyth, begun in the first campaign of 1277, anchored the southern end of his strategic programme along the Cardigan Bay coast. The castle controlled the port through which supplies and reinforcements could reach the English forces operating against Gwynedd, and its position on the headland above the Rheidol and Ystwyth estuaries made it a natural administrative centre for the newly conquered territories of mid-Wales. It was one of the first of Edward's purpose-built conquest castles and, like the others, was designed from the outset to be garrisoned and maintained as a permanent English presence in a permanently subjugated landscape.

Beaumaris Castle · 1295

Edward I's Iron Ring

The architectural masterpiece of Master James of St George, Beaumaris was begun in the spring of 1295 following the revolt of Madog ap Llywelyn, which had exposed the vulnerability of the northern end of Edward's Welsh settlement and demonstrated that the conquest was not as complete as it had appeared. The site chosen on the flat ground of the Anglesey shore gave Master James the opportunity he had never previously had — a blank canvas on level ground with no pre-existing constraints on the plan. The result was the most geometrically perfect concentric castle ever built in Britain. Water from the Menai Strait filled the moat. A dock on the south side allowed ships to unload directly into the castle. And the staggered gate towers ensured that no attacker who breached the outer ward could move directly to the inner without being destroyed in the killing ground between. It was never finished. Edward ran out of money and the political situation stabilised. What was built is enough to make the intention clear.

Builth Castle · 1277

Edward I's Iron Ring

Rebuilt as part of Edward I's first Welsh campaign, Builth commanded the strategic crossing of the Wye at the point where the river cuts through the uplands of mid-Wales, controlling movement between the Welsh heartland and the English march. Its strategic position gave it a role disproportionate to its modest scale — it was Builth's garrison that refused entry to Llywelyn ap

Gruffudd on 11 December 1282, the night before he was killed at Cilmeri, an act of refusal whose consequences for Welsh history were total and irreversible.

Caernarfon Castle · 1283

Edward I's Iron Ring

The greatest of Edward I's Welsh castles and the most deliberate architectural statement of conquest in Britain, Caernarfon was begun in 1283 on the site of an earlier Norman motte beside the Menai Strait. Master James of St George designed the castle and its accompanying walled town as a single unified statement of English imperial power, the polygonal towers and banded masonry of different coloured stone consciously echoing the walls of Constantinople — a claim to Roman imperial succession in stone. The Eagle Tower at the castle's western end, with its three turrets and its carved stone eagles, was the residence of the justiciar of north Wales, the man who governed the conquered principality on the king's behalf. Edward presented his son, born in the castle in April 1284, as the first English Prince of Wales here in 1301 — a tradition, almost certainly embellished in the telling, that has shaped the relationship between Wales and the English crown ever since.

Caernarfon — Birthplace of Edward of Caernarfon · 1284

Edward I's Iron Ring

Edward of Caernarfon was born on 25 April 1284 in Caernarfon Castle, the first English heir to the throne to be born on Welsh soil. The story that Edward I presented him to the Welsh lords as a prince who spoke no English — technically true of a newborn, as Welsh chroniclers sourly noted — belongs to a much later tradition and is not recorded in contemporary sources. What is certain is that his birth in the castle was politically significant, a son of the English crown arriving in the heart of the conquered principality, and that Edward II's later investiture as Prince of Wales at Caernarfon in 1301 established a ceremonial connection between the castle and the title that has persisted to the present day.

WELSH · Castell Aberlleiniog · c.1088 Norman, c.1282 Welsh

Edward I's Iron Ring

Originally a Norman motte castle built on Anglesey around 1088 by Hugh of Chester during the first Norman penetration of the island, Castell Aberlleiniog was reoccupied and briefly held by Welsh forces during the revolt of 1282 before Edward I's forces swept across Anglesey as the decisive strategic move of the final campaign. The control of Anglesey — the breadbasket of Gwynedd, whose grain harvests fed the Snowdonian heartland — was Edward's master stroke. Cutting Gwynedd off from its food supply brought the campaign to a swift conclusion. The earthwork mound of Aberlleiniog survives near the Menai Strait, its long history compressed into a grassy profile above the water.

WELSH · Castell Dolwyddelan · c.1220 Welsh, 1283 Edwardian

Edward I's Iron Ring

Traditionally held to be the birthplace of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth, Dolwyddelan Castle in the Lledr valley commands the pass through Snowdonia from the south, one of the key routes through the mountains that any army moving against Gwynedd from mid-Wales had to negotiate. It was captured by Edward I's forces in January 1283 during the winter campaign that followed Llywelyn's death, an operation of remarkable logistical audacity in the depths of a Snowdonian winter. Edward immediately garrisoned the castle as an English stronghold, adding a new parapet to the great square tower and using Dolwyddelan as a base for the consolidation of the conquest. The castle that was the home of the greatest Welsh princes became, within months of the last prince's death, an instrument of English occupation.

Chirk Castle · 1295

Edward I's Iron Ring

Built by Roger Mortimer of Chirk as part of the settlement of the conquered Welsh territories following the campaigns of 1277 and 1282 to 1283, Chirk Castle on the Dee watershed above the Ceiriog valley has been continuously occupied for seven centuries and remains a family home today, maintained by the National Trust. Its round towers and curtain walls represent the Edwardian castle in private rather than royal hands — the great lords who received Welsh lordships from Edward building to the same standard as the crown castles but for their own dynastic purposes. The gardens at Chirk are among the

finest in north Wales and the castle's unbroken habitation gives it a warmth that the ruined crown castles cannot quite match.

Conwy Castle · 1283

Edward I's Iron Ring

Built in just four years from 1283 by Master James of St George with a workforce that at its peak numbered more than a thousand men, Conwy Castle and its associated town walls form the most complete surviving example of a medieval fortified town in Europe. The eight drum towers of the castle, the twenty-one towers of the town wall, the three gateways and the mill gate — all were conceived as a single unified defensive system enclosing the new English borough of Conwy on its rocky peninsula above the estuary. The Aberconwy Abbey that had stood on the site, the burial place of Llywelyn the Great, was moved bodily to Maenan to make way for the castle. Edward's message was architectural: the Welsh dead would not rest where English power was to be built. Richard II surrendered to Bolingbroke at Conwy in 1399, an irony that the Welsh chroniclers noted with satisfaction.

Denbigh Castle · 1282

Edward I's Iron Ring

Granted to Henry de Lacy, Earl of Lincoln, following the conquest, Denbigh Castle crowns the limestone outcrop above the walled town of Denbigh in the Vale of Clwyd. Its elaborate great gatehouse with three octagonal towers arranged around a central vaulted passage is one of the most ambitious architectural statements of the Edwardian settlement, de Lacy investing his personal resources in a structure that proclaimed the permanence and the sophistication of the new English order in north Wales. The town walls below the castle are substantially intact. The castle passed through several hands and was slighted during the Civil War, its ruins thereafter becoming one of the set pieces of Welsh Romantic tourism.

Flint Castle · 1277

Edward I's Iron Ring

The first of Edward I's new Welsh castles, Flint was begun in the summer of 1277 as the advance guard of the first campaign, the construction team moving along the north Wales coast from Chester under military protection as the army cleared the route ahead. Flint features a unique plan — a rectangular ward with three corner towers and a detached great tower in the fourth corner, connected to the ward by a drawbridge and surrounded by its own moat within the outer moat. The detached great tower has no parallel in English castle architecture. It was the scene of Richard II's effective surrender to Bolingbroke in August 1399, the encounter that Shakespeare dramatised in Richard II with Flint Castle as its setting — the only Welsh castle to have a Shakespearean scene.

Harlech Castle · 1283

Edward I's Iron Ring

Master James of St George's supreme achievement, Harlech stands on a rock above the Cardigan Bay coast commanding the approaches to Snowdonia from the sea with an authority that no photograph adequately conveys. The castle was supplied from the sea during its construction, a water gate at the base of the cliff giving access to a dock that served as the castle's lifeline. Its concentric plan, with the massive twin-towered gatehouse functioning as a self-contained fortress within the castle, was the model for Beaumaris. During Owain Glynŵr's revolt Harlech was held for the Welsh from 1404 to 1409, serving as Glynŵr's capital and the seat of his court and family. The song Men of Harlech, whatever its complex origins, draws on the castle's extraordinary record of sieges survived and positions held against overwhelming odds.

Hawarden Castle (Old) · 1282 significance

Edward I's Iron Ring

The old castle at Hawarden carries a significance in the history of the Iron Ring that has nothing to do with Edward I's building programme and everything to do with what happened here on Palm Sunday 1282. In the early hours of that morning Dafydd ap Gruffudd, brother of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, launched a surprise attack on the castle, killing its constable Roger Clifford and sparking the final Welsh revolt that would end with Llywelyn's death at Cilmeri in December and Dafydd's capture and execution

in 1283. The attack on Hawarden was the opening shot of the war that ended Welsh independence. Dafydd's reasons for launching it when he did, and without his brother's knowledge or approval, remain debated. The consequences were absolute.

Holt Castle · c.1282

Edward I's Iron Ring

Built by John de Warenne, Earl of Surrey, on the Dee at Holt following the conquest, this pentagonal castle with its five round towers arranged around a central courtyard was an innovative and geometrically ambitious design for its time. Little survives above ground — the castle was largely demolished in the seventeenth century and its stone used elsewhere — but its plan has been fully established through excavation and documentary research. The town of Holt that de Warenne planted beside the castle on the English bank of the Dee survives with its medieval street pattern largely intact.

Rhuddlan Castle · 1277

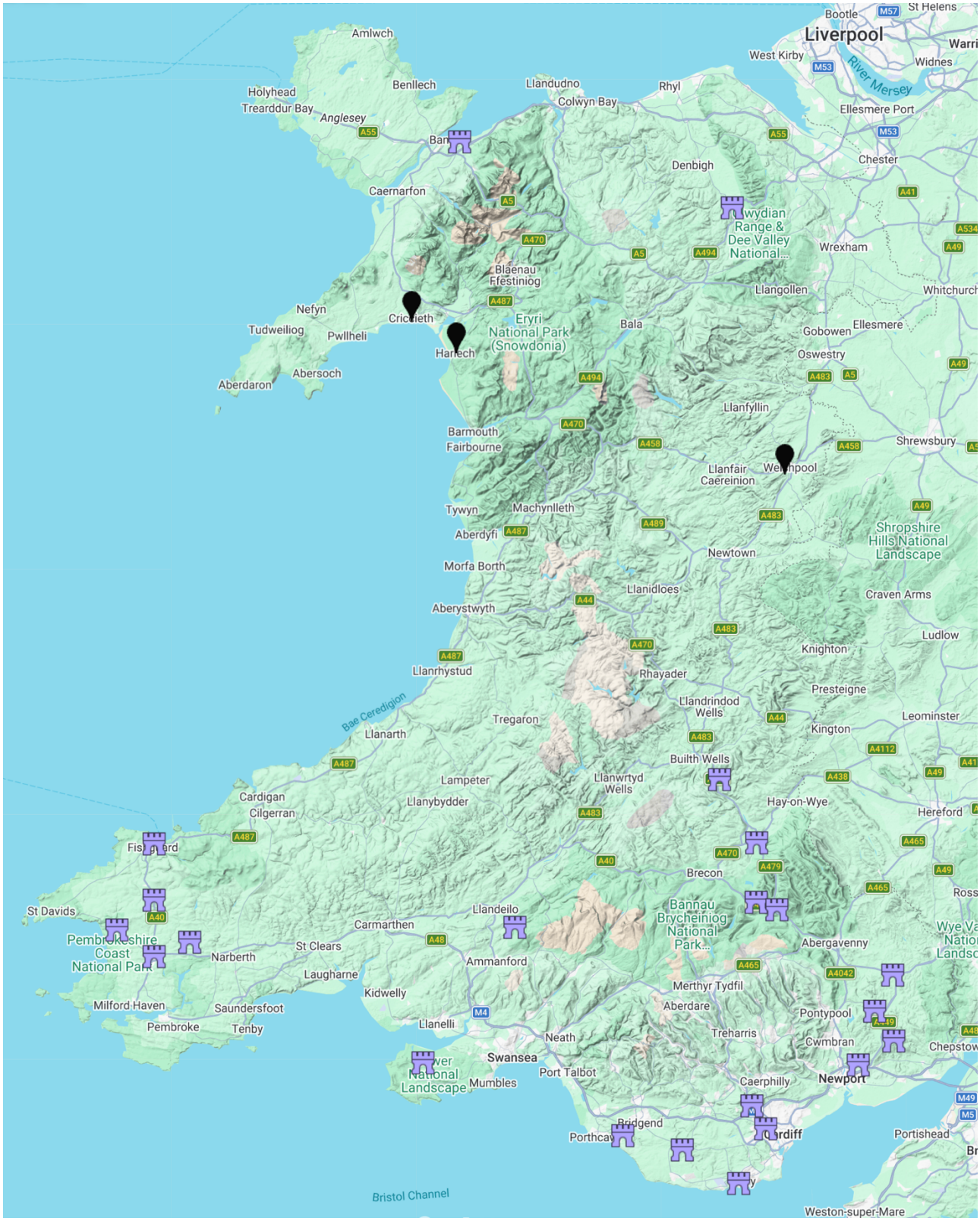
Edward I's Iron Ring

Edward I's first concentric castle in Wales, built at Rhuddlan from 1277 alongside the remarkable feat of engineering that straightened and canalised the River Clwyd for three miles to allow sea-going vessels to supply the castle directly. Master James of St George designed the diamond-shaped plan with its twin-towered gatehouses on opposite sides and its four round corner towers as a concentrated statement of concentric defence. The Statute of Rhuddlan was promulgated from this castle in 1284, the legal instrument that imposed English law and administration on the conquered principality of Wales and defined the constitutional relationship between Wales and the English crown that would persist until the Acts of Union of 1536 to 1543. Few buildings in Wales have had a more direct impact on the history of the nation than the castle from which that statute was issued.

WELSH FORTRESSES THROUGH TIME

A Companion Document

LAYER 8 — LATE MEDIEVAL 1300 TO 1450 AD



The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries brought no peace to Wales. The Iron Ring held, the English boroughs functioned, the law of 1284 remained in force — but the conquered principality was not a settled country. The economic and legal discrimination built into the Edwardian settlement generated a resentment that ran through Welsh society at every level, from the uchelwyr, the gentry class excluded from office in their own country, to the bondsmen whose renders still flowed to English-appointed officials. When the moment came, it came with extraordinary force.

Owain Glynŵr's revolt, beginning in 1400 and burning across Wales for a decade, was the last and greatest of the Welsh revolts against English rule and the one that came closest to success. At its peak Glynŵr controlled most of Wales, held Harlech as his capital, convened parliaments, negotiated with France and Scotland, and corresponded with the Pope. His Tripartite Indenture of 1405, dividing Britain between himself, the Percys of Northumberland, and Edmund Mortimer, was a serious political document rather than a fantasy. English armies could not pin him down and Welsh castles fell to him with a regularity that shook the English administration to its foundations.

The revolt failed in the end not through military defeat but through exhaustion — the scorched earth that both sides practised, the plague that returned through the decade, the failure of French support to materialise in sufficient force, and the growing competence of Prince Henry, later Henry V, who prosecuted the war in Wales with a patience and systematic thoroughness that prefigured his French campaigns. By 1410 the revolt was effectively over. Glynŵr vanished. Wales returned to English rule and remained there. But the revolt had permanently altered the terms of that rule — within a century a Welshman sat on the English throne, and the Tudor settlement that followed owed something to the memory of what Wales had almost achieved under its last native Prince.

Caerleon Castle Motte · c.1086

Late Medieval

The Norman motte castle at Caerleon was established within the ruins of the Roman legionary fortress of Isca Augusta, its builders raising the earthwork mound from the rubble and soil of a world that had ended six centuries before them. The decision to plant a new castle inside the Roman walls was pragmatic — the Roman defences offered a ready-made outer enclosure of formidable scale — but it also created one of the most layered sites in Wales, two military systems separated by six centuries occupying the same ground for the same strategic reason: command of the Usk crossing and the routes into south-east Wales.

Fishguard Fort · c.1779

Late Medieval

A coastal battery at Fishguard built in the later eighteenth century to defend the harbour against the threat of French naval attack during the American Revolutionary War, Fishguard Fort achieved its moment of history not through any action it took but through the events it witnessed in February 1797. A French expeditionary force of 1,400 men — the last invasion of mainland Britain — landed at Carregwastad Point near Fishguard and surrendered to Lord Cawdor's assembled militia and yeomanry within two days, the invasion collapsing through poor discipline, local resistance, and the famous intervention of Jemima Nicholas, who is said to have single-handedly rounded up a dozen French soldiers with a pitchfork. The fort's guns were never fired in anger.

Haverfordwest Castle · c.1120

Late Medieval

The dominant castle of Pembrokeshire, built by Gilbert de Clare on the ridge above the Western Cleddau river that commands the whole of the surrounding lowland, Haverfordwest became the administrative capital of the county and the principal commercial centre of south-west Wales throughout the medieval period. The castle today houses the county museum and record office within its substantial remains, a continuity of administrative function that would have seemed entirely natural to the medieval constables who governed the county from the same walls. Haverfordwest's position made it the hub of the little England beyond Wales — the anglicised south Pembrokeshire that retained its English character through the centuries of Welsh resurgence around it.

WELSH · Powis Castle · c.1283

Late Medieval

Originally built by the Welsh princes of Powys on their rocky ridge above the Severn valley at Welshpool, Powis Castle passed to the de la Pole family and subsequently to the Herbert family, becoming through successive phases of building and embellishment the finest surviving medieval castle in Wales and one of the great country houses of Britain. The hanging terraced gardens, laid out in the late seventeenth century in the Italian and French manner, are among the most celebrated in Europe. The castle's interior contains collections of outstanding quality including material associated with Robert Clive of India, whose son married into the Herbert family. The continuity of occupation from Welsh princely stronghold to National Trust showpiece across seven centuries is without parallel in Wales.

Raglan Castle · 1435

Late Medieval

The last great medieval castle built in Wales and the most magnificent, Raglan was begun by Sir William ap Thomas in 1435 and developed by his son William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, into a statement of aristocratic power that combined military strength with a grandeur of scale and decoration unprecedented in Welsh castle architecture. The great tower — the Yellow Tower of Gwent — stood separately from the main castle, surrounded by its own moat and hexagonal in plan, one of the most powerful tower keeps in Britain. The state apartments, the great hall, the fountain court, and the pitched stone court reflected a lord who was as much a Renaissance magnate as a medieval warrior. Raglan was the last castle in Britain to hold out for the king in the Civil War, surrendering in August 1646 after a siege of thirteen weeks. The Parliamentarians subsequently slighted it with a thoroughness that reflected how seriously they had taken the resistance.

Castell Coch (Victorian rebuild) · 1875

Late Medieval

The Victorian fantasy castle built by John Patrick Crichton-Stuart, third Marquess of Bute, to designs by William Burges on the genuine thirteenth-century foundations of a Welsh castle above the Taff gorge north of Cardiff, Castell Coch is one of the most extraordinary buildings in Wales. Burges researched the original medieval structure with scrupulous archaeological care and then produced interiors of extravagant High Victorian fantasy — painted ceilings, carved animals, murals of Aesop's fables, a bed of almost hallucinatory decoration. The Marquess of Bute was the richest man in Britain, his wealth built on the Cardiff coal trade, and he spent it on medieval fantasy with an enthusiasm that Burges matched and exceeded. The castle was never intended as a permanent residence. It was a summer retreat and a statement of romantic medievalism in an age that took such statements seriously.

Penrhyn Castle (Victorian) · 1820

Late Medieval

A great Norman Revival mansion built for the Pennant family near Bangor to designs by Thomas Hopper between 1820 and 1837, Penrhyn Castle was financed by the profits of the Jamaican slave trade and the Penrhyn slate quarry, whose thousands of workers would stage one of the longest industrial disputes in British history — the Penrhyn Quarry Lock-out of 1900 to 1903 — in the shadow of these walls. The sheer scale of the building, its keep, towers, and great hall executed in Norman Revival style with a thoroughness that makes it more convincing as a medieval castle than many genuine ones, makes Penrhyn one of the most remarkable Victorian buildings in Britain. The National Trust collection within includes a slate bed made for Queen Victoria, who declined to sleep in it.

WELSH · Harlech — Glyndŵr's Capital · 1404

Late Medieval

Harlech Castle was captured by Owain Glynŵr's forces in 1404, when the English garrison, cut off and starving, surrendered after a prolonged blockade. For the next five years it served as Glynŵr's capital, the seat of his court, his chancery, and his family. His wife Margaret, his daughters, and his grandchildren were all captured here when the castle finally fell to Prince Henry in 1409, and Margaret died in the Tower of London within the year. Glynŵr himself escaped and was never captured, never pardoned, and never accounted for — he simply disappeared from the record after 1412, and no grave

has ever been found. Harlech Castle, which Edward I built to hold Wales down, became for five years the capital of a Wales that refused to stay down.

Aberedw Castle · c.1140

Late Medieval

A small motte castle on a rocky knoll above the confluence of the Edw and Wye rivers in Radnorshire, Aberedw commanded the valley junction and the approach routes through this upland border territory. The castle carries one of the more poignant associations in Welsh history — Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, Prince of Wales, is said to have spent his last night at Aberedw on 10 December 1282 before riding out the following morning to meet the English force near Cilmeri at which he was killed. Whether the tradition is literally true or not, the small castle above the Edw has become part of the landscape of Llywelyn's final hours.

Barry Castle · c.1200

Late Medieval

A Norman castle of the de Barry family overlooking Barry Island and the Bristol Channel in the Vale of Glamorgan, Barry Castle was built to command the coastal approaches and the island harbour that gave the de Barry family both their name and their wealth. The substantial stone remains — a hall range and towers set within a walled enclosure — survive on a ridge above the modern town of Barry, their medieval origins incongruous in a landscape defined by the Victorian coal-exporting dock that transformed the village of Barry into a town of fifty thousand people within a generation.

Blaenllynfi Castle · c.1088

Late Medieval

A castle of the de Braose lords at the head of the Llynfi valley in Breconshire, Blaenllynfi controlled the upland route between the Wye valley and the lowlands of Glamorgan, a pass through the Brecon Beacons that was a significant route for both trade and military movement. The de Braose lords of Brecon and Abergavenny were among the most aggressive and controversial of the Norman marcher lords, their name associated with some of the most violent episodes of the Norman-Welsh conflict including the Abergavenny massacre of 1175. Blaenllynfi's earthworks and stone remains occupy a commanding hillside position above the valley.

Bronllys Castle · c.1144

Late Medieval

A castle of the de Braose and later Clifford lords in the Llynfi valley of Breconshire, Bronllys is distinguished by its cylindrical stone keep standing on a Norman motte, one of the finest and most complete round keeps in mid-Wales. The tower survives to near-full height, its internal floors gone but its exterior walls intact, rising from the earthwork mound with an elegance that belies the violent history of the de Braose lordship in which it was built. The site is managed by Cadw and the keep is accessible, the interior giving a clear impression of the original floor levels and the quality of the medieval stonework.

Candleston Castle · c.1350

Late Medieval

A fortified manor house on the Glamorgan Heritage Coast near Merthyr Mawr, built by the de Cantelupe family in the mid-fourteenth century and subsequently engulfed by the same advancing sand dune system that had already consumed Kenfig and Pennard to the west. Candleston was abandoned to the dunes in the eighteenth century and the ruins, partly consolidated, now stand within a nature reserve of exceptional character. The Merthyr Mawr dune system is one of the largest in Europe, and Candleston sits at its heart, the sand having reclaimed a landscape that medieval people farmed and inhabited for centuries.

Carreg Cennen Castle · c.1248

Late Medieval

Dramatically perched on a near-vertical limestone crag above the upper Cennen valley in Carmarthenshire, Carreg Cennen is the most spectacularly positioned castle in Wales and one of the most visually powerful in Britain. The approach to the castle involves a climb of three hundred feet from the car park below, the path winding around the base of the crag before the gatehouse comes into view above. The castle's most remarkable feature is a vaulted underground passage descending through the rock of the crag to a cave and natural spring at its base, a water source that could sustain a garrison through any siege. The castle was slighted by Yorkist forces in 1462 to prevent its further use as a Lancastrian stronghold, the demolition requiring five hundred men working for several weeks. Even slighted it remains overwhelming.

WELSH · Criccieth Castle · c.1230

Late Medieval

Founded by Llywelyn ap Iorwerth around 1230 on a rocky headland commanding the southern coast of the Llŷn Peninsula and Tremadog Bay, Criccieth is one of the finest examples of a native Welsh castle subsequently extended and adapted by the English following the conquest. Edward I captured it in 1283 and substantially enlarged the defences, adding towers in the English manner to a castle whose original conception was entirely Welsh. Owain Glynŵr's forces burned it in 1404 during the revolt and it was never rebuilt, the fire-blackened masonry still visible on the inner ward walls. The castle stands above the town of Criccieth with its two towers silhouetted against the sky above the beach, one of the defining images of the north Wales coast.

Roch Castle · c.1200

Late Medieval

A Norman castle built on a volcanic rock plug that rises dramatically from the flat agricultural landscape of Pembrokeshire, Roch commands the approach to the St Davids peninsula from the east with a visibility that serves as both advertisement and warning. According to local tradition the castle was built by Adam de Rupe, who had been told by a wizard that he would die from the bite of a viper — and who climbed to the top of the rock to escape them, only to be killed by a viper carried to his chamber in a bundle of firewood. Roch Castle is the birthplace of Lucy Walter, the Welsh woman who became the mistress of the future Charles II during his exile and the mother of the Duke of Monmouth. The castle has been restored as a luxury holiday retreat.

Ruthin Castle · c.1277

Late Medieval

A castle built by Reginald de Grey following the Edwardian conquest, Ruthin in the Vale of Clwyd became the administrative centre of the Grey lordship of Dyffryn Clwyd. Reginald de Grey's grandson, also Reginald, was the lord whose dispute with Owain Glynŵr over common land at Croesau sparked the revolt of 1400 — or so Glynŵr's supporters claimed. Glynŵr's first act of open revolt was a raid on the Ruthin fair in September 1400, plundering the town that the Grey lords had made the commercial heart of their lordship. The medieval castle was subsequently developed as a hotel and is now a luxury spa resort, its Victorian Gothic additions sitting within the medieval earthworks.

St Quentin's Castle · c.1102

Late Medieval

A castle of the de St Quintin family near Llanblethian in the Vale of Glamorgan, later absorbed into the Clare lordship of Glamorgan, St Quentin's Castle occupies a ridge above the village with views across the Vale to the Bristol Channel. The surviving remains include sections of curtain wall and a tower of the later stone castle built on the Norman earthworks. The de St Quintin family were one of the lesser Norman dynasties of Glamorgan, their name eventually anglicised beyond recognition but their castle remaining as evidence of their presence in the landscape.

Old Bishop's Palace Llandaff · c.1200

Late Medieval

The medieval palace of the bishops of Llandaff, adjacent to Llandaff Cathedral on the bank of the Taff in what is now a suburb of Cardiff, its ruined hall and gatehouse survive within the cathedral close as evidence of the wealth and administrative importance of the medieval diocese. Llandaff Cathedral itself claims the oldest Christian site in Wales, its origins traced to the sixth century, and the Bishop's Palace that grew beside it through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries reflected the growing prosperity of a diocese whose estates covered much of Glamorgan. The palace was damaged during Owain Glynŵr's revolt and never fully restored, beginning the long decline that left the ruins visible today.

Tretower Castle · c.1100

Late Medieval

A Norman motte castle in the Usk valley above Crickhowell, Tretower was developed by the de Picard and subsequently the Turberville families into a substantial stone stronghold whose cylindrical tower keep, built in the early thirteenth century, remains one of the finest examples of its type in Wales. What makes Tretower exceptional is not the castle alone but its relationship with Tretower Court immediately beside it — a late medieval fortified manor house of the highest quality, built by the Vaughan family in the fifteenth century when the castle had become redundant as a military structure. The two buildings together span three centuries of domestic and military architecture, the castle giving way to the court as security gave way to comfort as the primary requirement of a Welsh gentleman's residence.

Troggy Castle · c.1200

Late Medieval

A small castle on the banks of the Troggy brook in Monmouthshire, associated with the minor Norman lords of the lower Usk valley, Troggy Castle represents the most intimate scale of medieval fortification — a lord's defended house rather than a strategic military installation, its earthwork remains surviving in quiet farmland that has changed little in character since the castle was occupied. Sites of this kind — minor, local, largely unrecorded in the chronicles — are as important to understanding the texture of medieval Wales as the great castles whose histories fill the history books.

Usk Castle · c.1100

Late Medieval

A Norman castle commanding the Usk river crossing at the town of Usk, developed by Richard de Clare into a substantial stone fortress whose round keep and curtain walls controlled one of the principal crossing points of the Usk between Caerleon and Abergavenny. Owain Glynŵr captured Usk in 1402 and it was the scene of a significant Welsh defeat the following year when his forces were routed at the battle of Pwll Melyn outside the town, his brother Tudur killed and his son Gruffudd captured and imprisoned in the Tower of London where he died. Usk Castle was later partly converted into a private residence that remains inhabited today, one of the few Welsh castles where the medieval structure and domestic habitation coexist.

Weobley Castle · c.1304

Late Medieval

A fortified manor house on the northern coast of Gower above the Loughor estuary, built by the de la Bere family in the early fourteenth century, Weobley is one of the finest and best-preserved examples of the late medieval transition from castle to fortified house in Wales. Its hall, chapel, porch, and gatehouse survive in considerable completeness within a scheduled monument managed by Cadw. The view from the site north across the Loughor estuary to the hills of Carmarthenshire is one of the most peaceful in south Wales, the stillness of the estuary mudflats making it difficult to imagine that this was once a fortified residence on a coastline exposed to seaborne raiding.

Wiston Castle · c.1108

Late Medieval

A Norman motte castle in Pembrokeshire built by Wizo the Fleming, one of the Flemish settlers planted in south Pembrokeshire by Henry I as part of his deliberate policy of colonising the region with non-Welsh incomers who would have no sympathy with Welsh rebellion. Wizo gave his name to the castle and to the village of Wiston that grew beneath it, his Flemish origin reflected in the distinctly non-Welsh character of the south Pembrokeshire settlement he helped establish. The earthwork motte and the crumbling remains of a shell keep survive prominently in the village, the mound rising above the surrounding farmland as a clear reminder of the colonial origins of this corner of Wales.

Wolf's Castle · c.1100

Late Medieval

A Norman earthwork castle in north Pembrokeshire whose motte gives its name to the village of Wolf's Castle above the upper Western Cleddau river, commanding the approach from Haverfordwest toward Fishguard and the north Pembrokeshire coast. The castle is one of numerous minor Norman earthwork fortifications in the Pembrokeshire landscape whose primary purpose was the control of road junctions and river crossings in a territory that the Normans were colonising rapidly in the early twelfth century. The motte survives in the village, its earthwork profile the only monument to a Norman presence that shaped the landscape and the place name of this corner of Wales.
