

Edward I and the Conquest of Wales

England's conquest of Wales in the thirteenth century was one of the defining moments of Edward I's reign. Turbulent relations between England and Wales were well-established. Welsh kings had been driven into submission by the Anglo-Saxons¹ before Norman invasions of south Wales in the late eleventh century saw the first attempted acquisition of Welsh land by a unified English crown. Further conflicts ensued between the two nations with Wales itself suffering internal political instability. Whilst complete subjugation required two separate campaigns between 1277 and 1283, Edward I succeeded where those before him had only come close.

The conquest of Wales shows skilled kingship, ambition, political intelligence, and military prowess as well as strategic competence in Edward I, who possessed the attributes of leadership and of a soldier which his father, Henry III, had not exhibited.² These would prove crucial to Edward's dealings with Wales in which he was undoubtedly attempting to enforce his claims to overlordship. His involvement in Wales began whilst his father was still king with the acquisition through marriage of the earldom of Chester and the attached four cantrefs.³ However, once king establishing the practical implications of his claims to overlordship proved unacceptable⁴ and military action appeared necessary. On 12 November 1276 Edward declared war on the Prince of Wales, Llywelyn ap Gruffydd,⁵ who's title had been officially recognised by Henry III at the Treaty of Montgomery in 1267.⁶ Edward later requested homage from each leader of the Welsh kingdoms, but Llywelyn repeatedly refused. Edward launched a ferocious campaign⁷ to subdue the Welsh, who were no strangers to English oppression and therefore Llywelyn gained much support. It has been suggested that Llywelyn's failure to give homage to Edward I may have been the fault of Henry III having not been at his

¹ Sean Davies, *Edward I's Conquest Of Wales* (Great Britain: Pen & Sword Books Limited, 2017) p. 4.

² Caroline Burt & Richard Partington, *Arise England Six Kings And The Making Of The English State* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 2024) p. 183.

³ Michael Prestwich, 'Edward I And Wales', in *The Impact Of The Edwardian Castles In Wales*, ed. by Diane M. Williams and John R. Kenyon (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010) pp. 1-8 (p. 1).

⁴ Michael Prestwich, *Edward I*, First Pub. in Great Britain by Methuen London Ltd in 1988, First Pub. in Paperback by Metuen London in 1990 (Great Britain: Yale University Press, 1997) p. xiv.

⁵ *ibid.* p. 170.

⁶ Cadw, *The Castles And Town Walls Of Edward I Rock Stars* (2024)

<https://cadw.gov.wales/learn/sites-through-centuries/medieval-wales/castles-town-walls-edward-i>
[Accessed 19th December 2024].

⁷ Cadw, *The Castles And Town Walls Of Edward I Rock Stars*, [Accessed 19th December 2024]

strongest when he wrote the Treaty of Montgomery.⁸ Llywelyn was forced into being his vassal, without, as Prestwich states, “the nature of service...owed as a result” being clearly set out.⁹ The prince did not want to lose power to Edward, yet relations with England deteriorated with increased power shifting to marcher barons and the English king.¹⁰ Edward assisted the unrest by providing sanctuary for both Llywelyn’s brother Daffydd and the prince of Powys after they turned against Llywelyn, as well as kidnapping Eleanor de Montfort, Llywelyn’s fiancée. It can be seen that much hostility led up to military invasion.

Frictions had long been growing between Llywelyn and the Marcher lords, who included the powerful Roger Mortimer.¹¹ In 1276 Edward’s marcher lords began incursions on the prince’s men, whilst the king positioned three military commands at Chester, Montgomery and Carmarthen, co-ordinating efforts which gradually re-imposed English rule in crucial areas such as the middle March from Cedewain to Brecon.¹² By July 1277 when Edward arrived at Chester, Llywelyn had been isolated within his principality of Gwynedd, his allies having surrendered or defected to the English. Edward’s army then advanced slowly along the northern Welsh coastal route clearing vast areas of woodland as they went, preventing enemy ambushes and creating supply routes. As Davies asserts, Edward’s strategy in this campaign differed little from earlier royal campaigns in Wales.¹³ However, Edward progressed from staged piecemeal expansion to full-scale conquest¹⁴ recruiting large numbers of foot soldiers, cavalry and men for woodcutting and fortification work. The giant presence on land was matched by a naval presence with fleets of ships from the Cinque Ports.¹⁵ Edward’s determination created the largest armies seen in Britain until the seventeenth century.¹⁶ This implementation of military strength and sizeable workforce indicate Edward’s unwavering ambitions facilitated by drastic expenditure of royal finance and credit. An additional

⁸ William Pearl, *Edward I: The Conquest of Wales and the Castle Building System* (2014) p. 5
https://www.academia.edu/11568432/Edward_I_The_Conquest_of_Wales_and_the_Castle_Building_System
[Accessed 18th December 2024].

⁹ *ibid.* p. 5.

¹⁰ David Walker, *Medieval Wales*, First Pub. 1990 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 121.

¹¹ Marc Morris, *A Great And Terrible King Edward I And The Forging Of Britain*, first pub. by Hutchinson 2008, first pub. in paperback by Windmill Books 2009 (UK: Penguin Random House UK, 2024) p. 135.

¹² R.R. Davies, *The Age Of Conquest: Wales 1062 – 1415*, Re-printed 2006 (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000) pp. 333-334.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 334.

¹⁴ Michael Prestwich, ‘Edward I And Wales’, in *The Impact Of The Edwardian Castles In Wales*, ed. by Diane M. Williams and John R. Kenyon (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010) pp. 1-8 (p. 1).

¹⁵ Marc Morris, *A Great And Terrible King Edward I And The Forging Of Britain*, pp. 148-149.

¹⁶ Marc Morris, *A Great And Terrible King Edward I And The Forging Of Britain*. p. 372.

strategy from Edward saw grain harvested from Anglesey in an attempt to starve Llywelyn into submission. There is little doubt the king's forces dwarfed Llywelyn's and by November of 1277 the Welsh prince had no alternative but to surrender. That same month the Treaty of Aberconwy re-established peace between the two leaders, but took away much of Llywelyn's power and territory.

Llywelyn was forced into humiliating submission by Edward, who began enforcing English law and administration procedures on Wales and destroying the ruling Welsh dynasties. Welsh feudal society, not dissimilar to that of the earlier Anglo-Saxon model, was gradually altered to the English feudalism implemented by William I.¹⁷ This first campaign also saw the start of the re-fortification of existing castles and the building of new key strongholds by Edward with new castles at Flint, Aberystwyth, Rhuddlan and Builth.¹⁸



Fig.1. Flint Castle © (2013) Visit Wales¹⁹

The Welsh landscape was no stranger to fortifications from both the natives and the Normans. Previous efforts in 1273 had already seen both Roger Mortimer and the Prince of Wales rushing to 'build or repair castles in the

¹⁷ William Pearl, *Edward I: The Conquest of Wales and the Castle Building System* (2014) pp. 4-5 [https://www.academia.edu/11568432/Edward I The Conquest of Wales and the Castle Building System](https://www.academia.edu/11568432/Edward_I_The_Conquest_of_Wales_and_the_Castle_Building_System) [Accessed 18th December 2024].

¹⁸ R.R. Davies, *The Age Of Conquest: Wales 1062 – 1415*, Re-printed 2006 (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 338.

¹⁹ Visit Wales, 'Flint Castle', <https://www.flintshire.org/flint.html> [Accessed 30th December 2024].

vicinity of Montgomery'.²⁰ An indication of the tensions and readiness for conflict. Edward's building of strategically positioned, strongly fortified castles played a key part in the control and domination of Wales and can be seen as grander portrayals of sovereign enforcement

The 1277 campaign was planned brief military action followed by successful negotiations.²¹ The second campaign of 1282 was very different. Prince Dafydd, Llywelyn's brother, unexpectedly stormed Hawarden castle the night before Palm Sunday.²² This was not an isolated incident with Welsh rebels also raiding Oswestry, Carreg Cennen, Llandovery and taking the constable prisoner at Aberystwyth.²³ A 'general sense of resentment and outrage'²⁴ had been brewing within native Wales against Edward's oppression, political and legal changes. Llywelyn was able to align his own grievances with these rebellions, assuming leadership of the revolt and joining attacks on Rhuddlan and Flint. Dafydd, like many Welsh nobles, had supported Edward during the first campaign, but hostilities had grown with the lack of territory and power they had then been granted. The conflict of 1282 can be seen to have grown out of resentment for English rule and Edward's determination to regain control and force complete domination of Wales. Whilst the first conflict was a personal quarrel between king and prince, the second was a 'war of national liberation'.²⁵ However, no area of south Wales participated, instead contributing to Edward's forces. Five years of English interference into Welsh internal affairs was unwelcomed and whilst Welshmen were more united in 1282, we see the nation still not one united force and in both conflicts this must have contributed to Welsh losses. Edward is seen again to have a much larger accessible military force with clear, organised and agreed objectives. Once aware of rebel incursions, Edward acted quickly to prevent further rebellion resolving to finally 'put down the malice of the Welsh'.²⁶ Marcher lords again began military action from Chester, Montgomery and Carmarthen, whilst a main army gathered at Worcester. Edward implemented a three-pronged attack with Roger Mortimer leading forces through central Wales,

²⁰ Marc Morris, *A Great And Terrible King Edward I And The Forging Of Britain*, , first pub. by Hutchinson 2008, first pub. in paperback by Windmill Books 2009 (UK: Penguin Random House UK, 2024) p. 135.

²¹ Michael Prestwich, *Edward I*, First Pub. in Great Britain by Methuen London Ltd in 1988, First Pub. in Paperback by Methuen London in 1990 (Great Britain: Yale University Press, 1997) p. 182.

²² *ibid.*, p. 182.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 182.

²⁴ R.R. Davies, *The Age Of Conquest: Wales 1062 – 1415*, Re-printed 2006 (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 347.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 348.

²⁶ Paul V. Walsh, 'King Edward's Conquest Of Wales', *Military History*, (Herndon, Va.) (1999) Vol. 15 (6) pp. 50-57 (55).

Gilbert de Clare (later replaced by William de Valance) commanding armies in the south and Edward himself leading an army in north Wales.²⁷ However, unlike in 1277, the English found it harder to break the Welsh. They were unable to recapture besieged castles in the north and a failed attempt at Carmarthen saw Llywelyn arrive in the south to strengthen rebel morale before moving north. English forces were able to take the Tywi Valley before retracing Edmund I's tenth century route through Ceredigion to defeat the then King of Gwynedd. Once again the campaign in the south coincided with Edward marching to Gwynedd in the north,²⁸ reaching Rhuddlan Castle in July and again dispatching troops to Anglesey. Five years on submission of Llywelyn was no longer the objective; Edward was intent on the complete conquest of Wales. However, subduing the Welsh was not that easy. Gilbert de Clare was ambushed in the south in June 1282.²⁹ A pontoon bridge had been constructed across the Menai Strait to help ambush the rebel forces from all sides. Action was paused when negotiations started, but in November the English noble Luke de Tany disregarded orders and led forces across the bridge only to be ambushed by the rebels.³⁰ This further delayed Edward's advance into Snowdonia. Welsh forces then moved into mid-Wales keen to make alliances. Dafydd remained in the north and Llywelyn travelled south with an army which stopped at Builth by December 1282. The English were ready on the other side of the Wye and as skirmishes ensued Llewelyn was killed at the Battle of Orewin Bridge. The hope of Welsh independence died alongside the last native Prince of Wales. Dafydd was eventually captured and executed at Shrewsbury in 1283.³¹

Edward I had achieved victory and conquest over Wales for himself and England. His castle building programme continued with refortifications at Denbigh in 1282, and following his conquest victory construction of new fortifications began in 1283 with castles at Caernarfon, Conwy and Harlech. Edward's final castle construction in Wales began in 1295 with Beaumaris. An ambitious project on Anglesey, Beaumaris was unfinished due to lack of funds, however remains an impressive medieval architectural structure. These castles are part of Edward's 'iron ring' of fortresses built across north Wales which also

²⁷ Mark Milligan, *Edward Longshank's Iron Ring Of Castles*, (2021) <https://www.heritagedaily.com/2021/04/edward-longshanks-iron-ring-of-castles/138718> [Accessed 23rd December 2024].

²⁸ Paul V. Walsh, 'King Edward's Conquest Of Wales', *Military History*, Vol. 15 (6) (1999) pp. 50-57 (55).

²⁹ Stuart Brown, *The Battle Of Orewin Bridge*, (n.d) <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofWales/The-Battle-of-Orewin-Bridge/> [Accessed 28th December 2024].

³⁰ Paul V. Walsh, 'King Edward's Conquest Of Wales', *Military History*, p.55.

³¹ David Walker, *Medieval Wales*, First Pub.1990 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 131 & 133.

includes Flint, Hawarden, Rhuddlan, Builth, and Aberystwyth from 1277, signalling his full authority in Wales. However, the Welsh cannot be thought of as weak, if such strong and commanding fortifications were seen as necessary by Edward to keep the natives pacified. The Welsh fought with strength, but Edward I was stronger. Edward's new castles were part of a colonisation programme which also included new 'English' towns, such as Flint, Aberystwyth, and Rhuddlan.³² This enabled the gradual absorption of Wales into England.³³

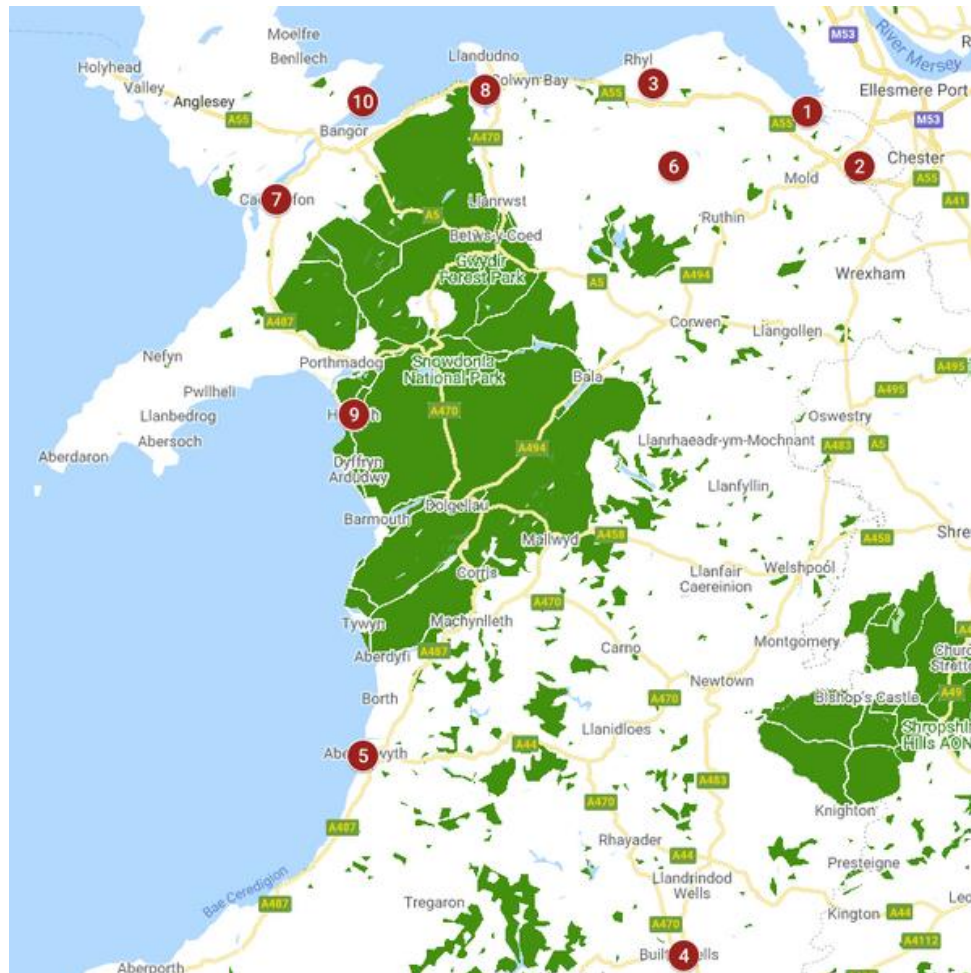


Fig.2. Map of Edward I's Iron Ring of Castles. (1-10) Flint, Hawarden, Rhuddlan, Builth, Aberystwyth, Denbigh, Caernarfon, Conwy, Harlech and Beaumaris. Imaged copied from Wikimedia Commons.³⁴

³² Mark Milligan, *Edward Longshank's Iron Ring Of Castles* (2021) <https://www.heritagedaily.com/2021/04/edward-longshanks-iron-ring-of-castles/138718> [Accessed 28th December 2024].

³³ Stuart Brown, *The Battle Of Orewin Bridge*, (n.d) <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofWales/The-Battle-of-Orewin-Bridge/> [Accessed 28th December 2024].

³⁴ Eggishorn, *Map Of Edward I Of England's Castles*, 2020 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:IronRing.png> [Accessed 29th December 2024].

We see the first conflict highlighting logistical problems between the English feudal traditions and the older customs within Wales by way of a personal dispute. A way of ending these problems can be seen in the second conflict in Edward's aim of domination over Wales and enforcement of English law and rule. The effect of these conflicts and eventual conquest of Edward I cannot be minimised. His political, military strengths and achievements realised ruthless ambition, likely held by those before, yet unable to be achieved. He is shown to have had strength in numbers of men and finance over the Welsh, however, their efforts should not be ignored. The Welsh were not subdued quickly or easily and whilst Edward I's intelligence cannot be denied, it must be asked how much of the friction of the centuries before helped prepare for the final conquering of this nation by an English monarch.

A much more detailed description and analysis could be given in regards to Edward I's conquest of Wales, but this brief outline shows unwavering ambition and determination in the ruler. His actions utilised military and monetary resources on scales unknown before the thirteenth century to English royalty. His victory permanently changed the political geography and landscape of the British Isles. Edward I exhibited and exercised the power of the English crown over a smaller fragmented nation, whereby he was perhaps assisted by their own internal problems. His extensive undertaking of castle building can still be seen today as an indication of his force and power over the medieval Welsh.

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