

# The Castles of the Ring of Iron

Article by [Castle Crawl Cymru](#)

The Ring of Iron is a group of castles built by King Edward I of England in the late 13th century.

Edward I ordered a chain of castles to secure his authority and suppress rebellion after his conquest of Wales. These castles were positioned along the north and west coasts and in key river valleys. Many survive today as some of the most impressive medieval castles in Europe.

The Ring of Iron included Beaumaris, Caernarfon, Conwy, Harlech, and several others. Their design reflected the latest military architecture of the period, with concentric defences, big gatehouses, and water access for supplies.

They formed a defensive and administrative system to enforce English rule across Gwynedd and further beyond.

## The Purpose of the Ring of Iron

Edward I launched campaigns against Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, the Prince of Wales in 1277 and again in 1282. Llywelyn resisted English control but was killed in battle in 1282. His death marked the end of native Welsh independence.

Edward commissioned a series of castles designed both as military strongholds and centres of royal administration to prevent further uprisings. They were positioned to control key routes, ports, and river crossings. Each castle served as a base for English garrisons and officials, new walled towns often grew beside them and were settled mainly by English colonists.

The Ring of Iron was a military measure but also represented domination. Its castles enforced royal power and aimed to prevent rebellion; also providing secure residences for officials and traders.

## Conwy Castle

Conwy Castle was one of Edward I's first great castles in Wales and was built between 1283 and 1287. It was designed by the master mason James of St George, who oversaw a lot of the Ring of Iron's building.

Conwy castle is beside the River Conwy, giving it a defence on two sides. The castle has eight towers, linked by high curtain walls, and a planned inner and outer ward. Its position also allowed Edward's forces to be resupplied by sea if needed.

A new English town was founded alongside the castle, enclosed by a circuit of medieval walls. Much of the wall survives today, spanning nearly 1.3 km with 21 towers, making it one of the best-preserved examples in Britain.

## Caernarfon Castle

The building of Caernarfon Castle began in 1283, shortly after Edward I's conquest of Gwynedd. It had long been of strategic importance, close to the Menai Strait and earlier Roman and Norman settlements.

The polygonal towers and banded masonry were inspired by imperial Roman architecture, linking Edward's rule to the Caesars. The castle also featured a royal palace within its walls, making it a centre of administration as well as defence.

Edward invested his son as Prince of Wales at Caernarfon In 1301, establishing a tradition that continues today. The castle was later the site of resistance during Owain Glyndŵr's rebellion in the early 15th century.

## Harlech Castle

Harlech Castle is above Cardigan Bay and was built between 1283 and 1290. Its design follows the classic concentric plan, with a strong inner ward protected by an outer wall and towers.

Harlech played a key role in Welsh history. It held out during Owain Glyndŵr's rebellion in the early 15th century and later became a Lancastrian stronghold in the Wars of the Roses.

The famous song "Men of Harlech" (first published in the late 18th century) celebrates the castle's resistance and became part of Welsh cultural identity.

## Beaumaris Castle

The building of Beaumaris Castle began in 1295, later than the other Ring of Iron castles. It was intended to be the most technically advanced of them all, with perfect concentric defences, wide water-filled moats, and symmetrical design.

The castle featured two rings of walls with evenly spaced towers and a massive gatehouse which was planned again by James of St George. It was built on the Isle of Anglesey to secure English control after renewed Welsh resistance.

Beaumaris was never fully completed due to the costs of Edward's wars in Scotland. Even so, the surviving structure is regarded as one of the finest examples of late 13th-century military architecture in Europe.

## Other Castles Linked to the Ring of Iron

Conwy, Caernarfon, Harlech, and Beaumaris are often highlighted; however, several other castles formed part of Edward I's wider strategy in Wales. These strengthened control along the coast, river valleys, and borderlands, bringing the number in the immediate network to around ten (though Edward's wider castle-building campaign across Wales was even broader):

- **Rhuddlan Castle:** Begun in 1277, it controlled the River Clwyd and served as Edward's base during his first Welsh campaign. Its twin-towered gatehouse influenced later designs across the Ring of Iron.
- **Flint Castle:** Also begun in 1277, it was one of the earliest Edwardian castles in Wales. Its detached great tower, or donjon, is unusual in Britain and shows French influence.
- **Aberystwyth Castle:** A smaller coastal fortress begun in 1277 and later rebuilt. It served as a key administrative centre for English rule in mid-Wales.
- **Denbigh Castle:** Constructed from 1282, it was established on the site of a former Welsh stronghold. The castle and town together became an important administrative base in north Wales.
- **Builth Castle:** Built earlier but strengthened under Edward, it controlled central routes through mid-Wales and was vital in subduing local resistance.
- **Hawarden Castle (medieval ruins):** Though less substantial today, Hawarden formed part of Edward's forward line of castles near the Welsh border and played a role in his campaigns.

Together with the four major sites at Conwy, Caernarfon, Harlech, and Beaumaris, these fortresses created a network of up to **ten castles**, often described collectively as Edward I's **Ring of Iron**.

These additional castles supported Edward's wider strategy in Wales, though the four great castles of Gwynedd remain the best-known core of the 'Ring of Iron'.

## Architectural Features of the Ring of Iron

The castles of the Ring of Iron were at the cutting edge of 13th-century military architecture. They had strength, living spaces and symbolic power.

Key features of the castles:

- **Concentric Defences:** Multiple lines of walls, so attackers had to break through successive layers of fortification.
- **Massive Gatehouses:** Twin-towered entrances with portcullises and murder holes for added protection.
- **Sea Access:** Conwy, Caernarfon, Harlech, and Beaumaris had quays or stairways to allow resupply by ship.
- **Royal Apartments:** Several castles contained chambers for the king and his household, reflecting their dual role as palaces.
- **Symbolic Design:** Caernarfon's Roman-inspired masonry and Beaumaris's symmetry demonstrated power as well as military strength.

## Visiting the Ring of Iron Castles Today

Many of the Ring of Iron castles survive in impressive condition and are open to the public. They remain some of the most visited heritage sites in Wales as they are managed by Cadw, the Welsh Government's historic environment service.

- **Conwy Castle:** Open year-round with access to the towers and town walls.
- **Caernarfon Castle:** Houses the Royal Welch Fusiliers Museum alongside extensive battlements.
- **Harlech Castle:** Features a modern visitor centre and accessible bridge linking to the town.
- **Beaumaris Castle:** It offers a clear view of concentric castle design, although it is unfinished.
- **Rhuddlan and Flint:** Smaller but atmospheric ruins, often quieter to explore.

Visitor facilities usually include parking, toilets, and shops. Tickets can be purchased online or on site, with reduced entry available for children, students, and seniors. Cadw membership offers free admission across all sites.

## Wrapping it Up

The castles of the Ring of Iron remain some of the most prominent reminders of Edward I's conquest of Wales. They were built to control territory and impose authority and they also stand as enduring examples of medieval military design.

These castles are central to Welsh heritage and attract visitors from around the world. Each site offers insight into the history of medieval Britain.

Conwy, Caernarfon, Harlech and Beaumaris form a UNESCO World Heritage Site, recognised for their exceptional preservation and historical importance.

## Sources

- Ring of Iron, Wikipedia  
Overview of Edward I's "Ring of Iron," explaining the purpose, scope, and architecture of the castle network.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ring\\_of\\_Iron](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ring_of_Iron)
- Conwy Castle, Cadw  
Official Cadw page for Conwy Castle with visitor information and history.  
<https://cadw.gov.wales/visit/places-to-visit/castell-conwy>
- Caernarfon Castle, Cadw  
Official Cadw page for Caernarfon Castle, detailing its significance and features.  
<https://cadw.gov.wales/visit/places-to-visit/castell-caernarfon>
- Harlech Castle, Cadw  
Official Cadw page for Harlech Castle, covering site access, visitor facilities, and history.  
<https://cadw.gov.wales/visit/places-to-visit/castell-harlech>
- Beaumaris Castle, Cadw  
Official Cadw page with visitor info, opening times, and background.  
<https://cadw.gov.wales/visit/places-to-visit/beaumaris-castle>
- Rhuddlan Castle, Cadw  
Official Cadw page for Rhuddlan Castle including site features and history.  
<https://cadw.gov.wales/visit/places-to-visit/castell-rhuddlan>
- Men of Harlech, Wikipedia  
Details the origins and cultural significance of the Welsh song "Men of Harlech", associated with the seven-year siege of Harlech Castle during the Wars of the Roses.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Men\\_of\\_Harlech](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Men_of_Harlech)