

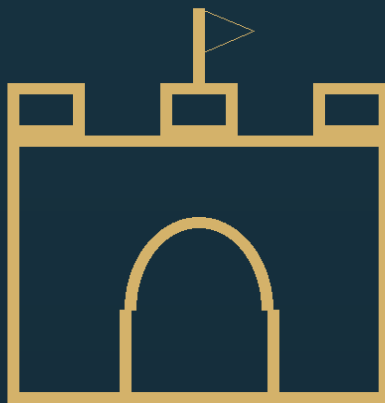
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THE LLŶN HISTORIES

BOOK 3 OF 5

Princes and Castles

Medieval Llŷn and the fall of native Wales



c. 1200 – 1415

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THE DIGITAL HEART OF THE LLŶN

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Book 3: Princes and Castles

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c. 1200 – 1415

Chapter 1

Gwynedd before the castles

The world of the independent Welsh princes

In the early thirteenth century the kingdom of Gwynedd was the most powerful native polity left in Wales. Its rulers, the princes of the house of Aberffraw, held the mountainous heartland of Snowdonia and the fertile lands of Anglesey and the Llŷn peninsula. They styled themselves *Tywysog Gwynedd* and, at the height of their power, *Prince of Aberffraw and Lord of Snowdon*. Their authority rested on a network of courts (*llysoedd*), bond townships, and the personal loyalty of free and unfree tenants. Stone castles were still relatively new in the Welsh landscape; most strongholds remained of earth and timber. The decision to build in stone on the rocky headland at Criccieth was therefore both practical and symbolic.

Llŷn itself formed part of the commote of Eifionydd. Its administrative centre was the *maerdref* (bond township and court) at Nefyn, a coastal settlement with access to the sea and to the routes that ran inland toward the mountains. The princes needed places that could control the peninsula, receive supplies by water, and serve as residences when the court moved. The older hillfort citadels on Garn Boduan and Carn Fadryn (examined in Book 2) show that the high places of Llŷn had long been associated with power. In the thirteenth century that tradition was translated into the new language of masonry castle-building.

Llywelyn ab Iorwerth — Llywelyn the Great — dominated Welsh politics from the 1190s until his death in 1240. Through a mixture of warfare, diplomacy and marriage (most notably to Joan, illegitimate daughter of King John of England), he extended Gwynedd's influence across much of Wales and forced the English crown to recognise his primacy among the Welsh rulers. His grandson Llywelyn ap Gruffudd — Llywelyn the Last — would inherit both the power and the vulnerability of that position. The castles they built, enlarged and defended on Llŷn are the physical expression of a native polity that was sophisticated, ambitious, and ultimately unable to withstand the concentrated military and financial power of Edward I.

This chapter only sets the political stage. The story of how that power was made visible in stone begins on the headland above Tremadog Bay.

Key sources

Brut y Tywysogyon; standard political narratives of thirteenth-century Gwynedd; Cadw and Coflein overviews of native Welsh castle-building; Lynch and related guides for the wider landscape of princely power.

Chapter 2

Llywelyn the Great builds Criccieth

Inner ward construction, c. 1230

The rocky headland that thrusts into Tremadog Bay between two beaches is one of the most naturally defensible sites on the entire Welsh coast. Steep cliffs fall to the sea on three sides; only the landward neck needs artificial strengthening. Sometime in the early 1230s Llywelyn ab Iorwerth chose this place for a new stone castle. The first documentary reference comes in 1239, when the *Brut y Tywysogyon* records that Gruffudd ap Llywelyn, the prince's son, was imprisoned here by his half-brother Dafydd. The castle must therefore have been sufficiently complete to serve as a high-security prison only a few years after work began.

The earliest masonry is the inner ward: a compact, roughly polygonal enclosure about 30–35 m across, built of local angular stone mixed with larger beach boulders. At its northern end stands the great twin-towered gatehouse — two D-shaped towers flanking a gate passage protected by a portcullis, doors, and murder holes. Arrow-slits in the towers allowed enfilading fire along the approach. A spring-fed cistern in the gate passage supplied water. This gatehouse is unusually sophisticated for a native Welsh castle of the period; most Welsh builders preferred simpler entrances. Its design suggests that Llywelyn employed masons familiar with the latest English military architecture.

The inner ward was small, strong, and self-contained. It was never intended as a sprawling fortress; it was a princely residence and a statement of control over the commote of Eifionydd and the sea routes of the bay. Timber buildings, including a hall, would have stood inside the courtyard. The choice of site also gave the garrison direct access to the sea for supply and, if necessary, escape.

By the time of Llywelyn the Great's death in 1240 the inner ward was complete and already in use. It remained the core of the castle through every later phase of enlargement, capture and refortification.

Visitor note

The inner gatehouse is still the most impressive surviving feature. Climb the towers (where safe and permitted) for the best sense of the original strength of the position. The seaward cliffs make the natural advantages of the site immediately obvious.

Key sources

Brut y Tywysogyon (1239 reference); Cadw and Coflein architectural descriptions; consensus of modern scholars (including RCAHMW and Castle Wales analyses)

attributing the inner ward and gatehouse to Llywelyn ab Iorwerth c. 1230; comparative discussion of native Welsh gatehouses.

Chapter 3

Nefyn, 1284: Edward's Round Table

The maerdref court at Nefyn and Edward I's tournament staged over conquered Gwynedd

Nefyn had long been the principal *maerdref* of the commote — the bond township where the prince's officials collected renders, held courts, and administered the surrounding lands. It possessed a harbour, access to the rich fisheries of the north coast, and a position on the routes that linked Llŷn to the rest of Gwynedd. After the final conquest of 1282–83, Edward I turned the old princely landscape to new purposes.

In July 1284, as part of his triumphal progress through the newly conquered territories, Edward held a “Round Table” at Nefyn. Contemporary chroniclers describe the event as a tournament with jousting, feasting and dancing in conscious imitation of the court of King Arthur. Round Tables were a fashionable form of chivalric festival across Europe; Edward had already used Arthurian symbolism elsewhere (the reburial of “Arthur” at Glastonbury in 1278, the receipt of a relic claimed to be Arthur's crown). Staging one at Nefyn, in the heart of the old princely lands, was a deliberate act of appropriation. The message was clear: the new ruler of Wales claimed not only the territory but the legendary past that the Welsh themselves held dear.

Little physical trace of the medieval *maerdref* survives in modern Nefyn. The present town and harbour stand on the same ground, and the visitor who walks the waterfront is occupying the space where Edward's knights jostled and the prince's officials had once collected the renders of Eifionydd. The contrast between the vanished wooden halls of the *llys* and the enduring stone of Criccieth Castle a few miles to the east is itself part of the story of conquest.

Visitor note

Nefyn remains a working coastal town. The beach and harbour give the best sense of the site's medieval advantages. No upstanding remains of the *maerdref* are visible; the significance is historical rather than monumental.

Key sources

Contemporary chronicles recording the 1284 Round Table at Nefyn (including references in the wider Edwardian historiography); discussions of Edward I's use of Arthurian symbolism (Loomis and later scholars); administrative context of the *maerdref* system in Gwynedd.

Chapter 4

Llywelyn the Last and the outer ward

Expansion of Criccieth, 1255–1282, under Llywelyn ap Gruffudd

Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, grandson of Llywelyn the Great, inherited a powerful but precarious position. The Treaty of Montgomery in 1267 had recognised him as Prince of Wales, the high point of native power. Thereafter the relationship with Edward I deteriorated steadily. In this climate Llywelyn strengthened his principal castles. At Criccieth the work of the 1260s and 1270s added an outer ward that enclosed more of the headland.

A stone curtain wall was built around the promontory, creating a southern (and northern) outer court linked by a narrow passage at the base of the inner ward. A large rectangular tower — often called the South-West or Montfort Tower — was added at the south-west corner; another rectangular tower, later known as the Engine Tower, stood on the north side. The new outer gateway was simpler than the great inner gatehouse but was protected by the wall-walks and the flanking towers. The plan of separate courts, each with its own major tower, has been compared with contemporary work at Ewloe and with Llywelyn's other building campaigns.

The enlarged castle was no longer merely a compact residence; it was a more extensive fortress capable of housing a larger garrison and of controlling the landward approaches more effectively. A letter from Llywelyn to Edward I, sent from Criccieth in 1273 or 1274, shows that the prince was still using the castle as a residence and administrative centre in the final years before the war. When war came in 1282, Criccieth was one of the key strongholds of native Gwynedd. It did not hold.

Key sources

Architectural consensus attributing the outer ward to Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (Cadw, Coflein, RCAHMW, Castle Wales); the 1273/74 letter; comparative plans of other Llywelyn castles (Dolforwyn, Dolwyddelan, Ewloe).

Chapter 5

1283: the fall of Gwynedd

Edward I's capture and refortification of Criccieth

Llywelyn ap Gruffudd was killed in a skirmish near Builth in December 1282. His brother Dafydd continued resistance into 1283, but the great strongholds of Gwynedd fell one by one. Criccieth was in English hands by March 1283; Henry of Greenford was receiving wages as its constable from 14 March. There is no detailed account of a siege; the castle may have been surrendered or captured with relatively little fighting once the wider position became hopeless.

Edward I did not demolish the native castle. Instead he spent substantial sums — the Pipe Rolls record £332 between 1283 and 1292, with total expenditure possibly approaching £500 — on refortification under the direction of his master mason, James of St George, and local officials. The inner gatehouse was heightened (the change in masonry is still visible). The south-east and south-west towers were refaced and rebuilt. The northern tower was remodelled, probably to serve as a platform for a siege engine (hence its later name, the Engine Tower). An outer barbican was added to strengthen the landward entrance. Timber buildings, including a great hall, were erected or repaired inside the inner ward. In 1284 the castle was given a free English borough and entrusted to William Leyburn with a garrison.

Criccieth became one link in the chain of fortresses — new and adapted — that locked English control onto the coast of north Wales. The same headland that had expressed the power of the princes of Gwynedd now expressed the power of the English crown. The architecture still visible today is a hybrid: substantially Welsh in its overall form, heightened and modified by English engineers.

Key sources

Pipe Roll and Wardrobe accounts for expenditure; dates of capture and appointment of constables; Cadw and RCAHMW analyses of the English-phase masonry; standard narratives of the 1282–83 campaign (Morris and later historians).

Chapter 6

Siege and rebellion

Madog ap Llywelyn's revolt, 1294–95, and its suppression

In the autumn of 1294 a widespread revolt broke out across Wales. The immediate triggers were heavy taxation (a fifteenth on movables) and the harshness of the new royal administration. In the north the leader was Madog ap Llywelyn, a distant kinsman of the last prince, who assumed the title Prince of Wales and Lord of Snowdon. Castles and towns were attacked simultaneously. Caernarfon was overrun and burnt; Harlech and Criccieth were placed under siege.

Criccieth held. Like Harlech it could be resupplied by sea, and the English garrison withstood months of investment through the winter of 1294–95. Edward himself was forced to abandon a planned campaign in Gascony and march into north Wales; at one point he was himself besieged in Conwy and had to be relieved by sea. The decisive military blow against Madog came at the Battle of Maes Moydog in Powys in March 1295, where the Earl of Warwick defeated the Welsh force. Madog escaped into the mountains but surrendered later that summer. He was taken to London; his ultimate fate is unknown.

The siege of Criccieth demonstrated both the strength of the refortified castle and the continued capacity of the Welsh to challenge English rule more than a decade after the conquest. Repairs were needed after the revolt, and further work was carried out in the early fourteenth century under Edward II, including additional heightening of the gatehouse. The castle remained a functioning garrison and prison into the later Middle Ages.

Key sources

Contemporary chronicles of the 1294–95 revolt; Dictionary of Welsh Biography and ODNB entries on Madog ap Llywelyn; accounts of the sieges of Criccieth and Harlech; administrative records of the garrison.

Chapter 7

Glyndŵr's fire

The 1404 burning of Criccieth's towers and the castle's slow decline

The last great native revolt began in 1400 under Owain Glyndŵr. By 1403–4 most of north-west Wales was in rebel hands. The great Edwardian castles at Harlech and Aberystwyth fell in 1404 and became Glyndŵr's courts. Criccieth was also taken. Contemporary and near-contemporary sources indicate that the English garrison, unable to receive supplies because French ships supporting the Welsh controlled the sea approaches, was forced to surrender. The castle was then burnt.

The physical evidence is still visible. The walls of the inner gatehouse, the south-west tower and the south-east tower are burnt red; layers of burnt material have been found in excavation. A document of 1450 describes the castle as “totally destroyed,” although the same document appears to enlarge the garrison, suggesting that some occupation or at least nominal control continued for a time. No constables are recorded after the Glyndŵr period, and there is no evidence of serious rebuilding. By the mid-fifteenth century Criccieth had ceased to function as a fortress. It decayed into the romantic ruin sketched by Turner at the end of the eighteenth century and conserved by the state in the twentieth.

The burning of 1404 closes the military history of the castle. The headland that had expressed the power of Llywelyn the Great, the ambition of Llywelyn the Last, the administrative grip of Edward I, and the resilience of the English garrison in 1294–95 became a monument to the final failure of the medieval Welsh revolts. The stones remain — hybrid, fire-scarred, and still commanding the bay.

Visitor note

Criccieth Castle is in the care of Cadw and is open to the public. The climb to the gatehouse and the walk around the inner ward are straightforward. Look for the reddened stone that still records Glyndŵr's fire. The views across Tremadog Bay to the mountains are among the finest in Wales.

Key sources

Accounts of the Glyndŵr revolt and the fall of the north-western castles; Cadw and excavation evidence for the burning; the 1450 document; later antiquarian descriptions (Pennant, Turner).

End matter

Collected source note

Principal sources: *Brut y Tywysogyon*; Pipe Rolls and related Edwardian accounts; Cadw guidebook and scheduling descriptions; Coflein NPRN 95281; RCAHMW architectural analyses; Castle Wales and Gatehouse Gazetteer syntheses; standard modern narratives of the conquest (J.E. Morris and later historians) and of the Glyndŵr revolt; Dictionary of Welsh Biography / ODNB entries on Madog ap Llywelyn and related figures. Full bibliography in the final edition.

Connection to the range

Book 2 ended with the Iron Age and early medieval citadels on the high hills. Book 3 shows how the princes of Gwynedd translated that tradition into masonry castles and how those castles became instruments first of native power and then of English conquest. The single clearest narrative arc in the series — sovereignty to conquest on one site — is also the natural bridge to the novels and to the later sacred and landscape volumes.

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