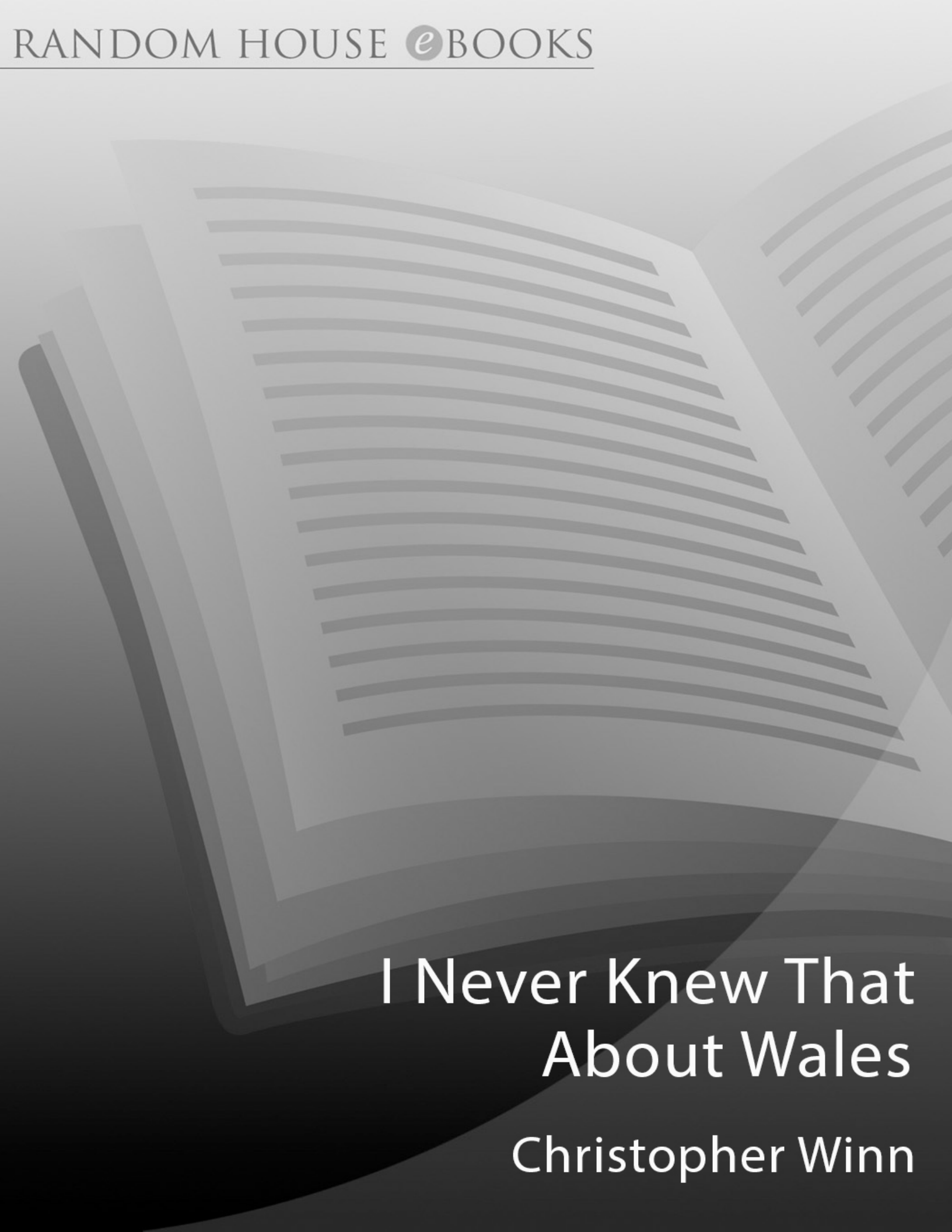


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



I Never Knew That
About Wales

Christopher Winn

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Map of Wales

Title Page

Dedication

Preface

Counties of Wales

ANGLESEY

BRECONSHIRE

CAERNARFONSHIRE

CARDIGANSHIRE

CARMARTHENSHIRE

DENBIGHSHIRE

FLINTSHIRE

GLAMORGAN

MERIONETH

MONMOUTHSHIRE

MONTGOMERYSHIRE

PEMBROKESHIRE

RADNORSHIRE

Gazetteer
Index of People
Index of Places
Acknowledgements
Copyright



About the Book

Take a spellbinding journey around Wales to discover the tales buried deep in the country's history.

Packed full of legends, firsts, birthplaces, inventions and adventures, *I Never Knew That About Wales* unearths the hidden gems all thirteen traditional Welsh counties hold. Explore Britain's greatest collection of castles, wander the glorious Gower peninsula, Britain's first Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, or marvel at Pontcysyllte, the longest bridged aqueduct in Britain.

This irresistible compendium will give you a captivating insight into the people, ideas and events that have shaped the individual identity of every place you visit, and will have you exclaiming again and again: 'Well, I never knew that!'

About the Author

Christopher Winn has been a freelance writer and trivia collector for over twenty years. He has worked with Terry Wogan and Jonathan Ross, and sets quiz questions for television as well as for the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*. He also produces for theatre and recently toured with Hugh Massingberd's play, *Ancestral Voices*, about James Lees-Milne. He is author of the bestselling *I Never Knew That About England* (Ebury Press, 2004). Books in the same series now cover Ireland, Scotland and London.



Christopher Winn

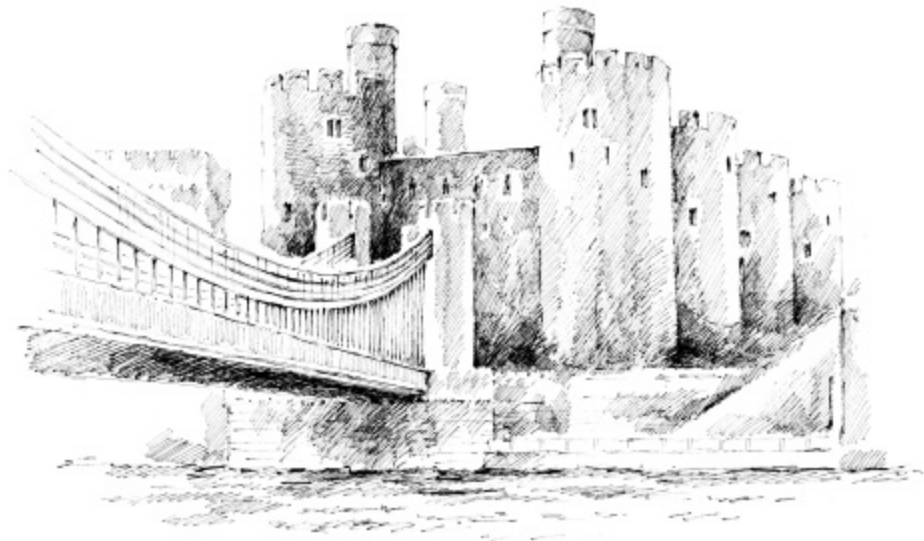
I Never Knew That
ABOUT
WALES



ILLUSTRATIONS
BY
Mai Osawa


EBURY
PRESS

For Esther



Conwy Castle, Caernarfonshire

Preface

Wales may be small in size but her influence is mighty. She is an ancient civilisation with Europe's oldest language and earliest seats of learning. Her collection of castles is the finest in the world and speaks of a rich and turbulent history. Wales gave us Britain's greatest Royal dynasty, the Tudors. A Welshman gave his name to America, Richard ap Meryk, who became Sheriff of Bristol and sponsored the Cabot brothers in their voyages of discovery to the New World.

Wales is the Land of Song and Poetry and brings the peoples of the world together in friendly competition. Her music soars around the globe and her musicians and actors mesmerise and win awards with their passion and their range.

Wales was the world's first industrial nation. Her coal and iron and back-breaking toil drove the Industrial Revolution and built the modern world. Her people fought for social justice, for dignity and for fairness.

The beauties of Wales, her wild mountains and moorlands, lacustrine valleys and glorious coastlines, inspired the Picturesque movement, the first landscape painters, and the first Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

For all this, Wales does not strut or boast or preen, but quietly nurtures her plentiful treasures behind mountains or in deep valleys. She is full of surprises, constantly delighting the traveller with the unexpected, one moment vast, magnificent panoramas, stately cathedrals and castles and giant monuments of industry, then tiny, exquisite

chapels, ancient burial grounds, cottages, waterfalls, green woods and dales.

In Wales there is nowhere that is not wondrous, nowhere that fails to amaze and charm, nowhere that does not bring forth the exclamation 'I never knew that!'

Wales is like nowhere else.

The Counties of Wales

I have organised *I Never Knew That About Wales* into the 13 traditional counties that existed from medieval times until the lamentable local government reorganisation in 1974.

Glamorgan and Pembrokeshire have both been distinctive areas from ancient days, while Anglesey, Caernarfonshire, Cardiganshire, Carmarthenshire, Flintshire and Merioneth were created by the Statute of Rhuddlan in 1284. The other 5 counties of Denbighshire, Montgomeryshire, Radnorshire, Breconshire and Monmouthshire were established out of the Marcher fiefdoms by the Law in Wales Act of 1535, which abolished the powers of the Lordships of the Marches.

While the post-1974 county names reflect some of the old Welsh kingdoms, their physical boundaries do not always equate to those of the original territories, which were, in any case, somewhat fluid. Nor do the modern counties take account of old loyalties and identities. The traditional counties, on the other hand, were quite deliberately determined by the ancient divisions of the country, are the most settled and long lasting of all the divisions of Wales, and form the backdrop, in terms of both time and flavour, to most of the stories in this book.

ANGLESEY

(YNYS MON)

COUNTY TOWN: BEAUMARIS

St Tysilio's Chapel and the Menai Bridge, the world's first large-scale suspension bridge

Menai Strait

Bridging the Divide

FOR AS LONG as anyone can remember, the island of Anglesey has been separated from the mainland by its own very effective moat, the MENAI STRAIT, 12 miles (19 km) of surging tides, treacherous sandbanks and whirling currents, 600 ft (180 m) across at its narrowest point. Today, according to the European Union, Anglesey no longer qualifies as an island, thanks to the success of two unique bridges.

Menai Bridge

The MENAI BRIDGE, designed by Thomas Telford and opened on 30 January 1826, was THE FIRST SUSPENSION BRIDGE IN THE WORLD CONSTRUCTED TO TAKE HEAVY TRAFFIC. At the time it was built it was THE LONGEST BRIDGE IN THE WORLD, 1,265 ft (386 m) in length, with a main span of 579 ft (176 m) hung from wrought-iron chains and suspended 100 ft (30 m) above the high tide mark, allowing plenty of room for ships to pass underneath. In 1839, the deck of the bridge was damaged

by strong gales, and it has been replaced twice, once in 1893, and most recently in 1940 with a steel deck.



As well as being an engineering wonder, the Menai Bridge is utterly beautiful. When seen from the A4080 viewing point to the west, it looks like an integral part of the landscape, the graceful lines of the bridge blending seamlessly with the undulating shapes of the Snowdonia mountains behind.

On the Anglesey side, on a little promontory below the bridge, there is a reminder of the times when it was not so easy to reach the island. A small 14th-century church sits on the site of a chapel founded in AD 630 by St Tysilio, where travellers could rest and pray, or give thanks, for a safe crossing.

Britannia Bridge

A little to the west is the BRITANNIA BRIDGE, opened in 1850 to carry the Chester to Holyhead railway across the Menai Strait. Designed by Robert Stephenson, son of railway pioneer George Stephenson, this was THE FIRST MAJOR TUBULAR BRIDGE IN THE WORLD. It consisted of two wrought-iron tubes of 479 ft (146 m) in length, along with two additional spans of 230 ft (70 m), set 100 ft (30 m) above the water and supported on limestone piers.



Originally, it was intended to hang the tubes from chains, rather in the manner of Telford's Menai suspension bridge but, in testing, the tubes proved immensely strong and quite capable of bearing the weight of the trains on their own. The holes from which the chains were to be slung can be seen at the top of the piers.

In 1970, a couple of local boys exploring the tubes dropped a burning torch and set fire to the bridge, which had to be closed for four years. It was reconstructed without the tubes, using a conventional arch structure, an option made possible by the fact that clearance was no longer needed for large ships to pass underneath. In 1980, a road deck was opened above the railway, and this now carries the A55 across to Anglesey. The monumental stone lions that guarded the original bridge still stand sentinel at each end.

As their famous bridges stand side by side across the Menai Strait, so Thomas Telford and Robert Stephenson rest side by side in Westminster Abbey.

Marquess of Anglesey

The best view of the two bridges is from the top of the 90 ft (27 m) high marble column built on the edge of his estate, in 1816, to commemorate the 1ST MARQUESS OF ANGLESEY, second in command to the Duke of Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo. The climb up 115 rickety steps is rewarded with one of the great views of the world, taking in the whole of Anglesey, the Menai Strait, the mountains of Snowdonia as well as the distant hills of the Llyn Peninsula. To stand before this stupendous panorama,

protected from the drop merely by a thin iron railing, with the wind buffeting the column and threatening at any moment to pluck you from the flimsy platform, is a truly exhilarating experience.



Sharing the view from the top of the column is a bronze statue of Henry Paget, the 1st Marquess of Anglesey, added in 1860. At Waterloo, while seated on his horse beside the Duke of Wellington, the Marquess, or the Earl of Uxbridge as he then was, had his leg shattered by a canon shell, an uncomfortable experience which caused him to exclaim, 'By God, Sir, I've lost my leg!'

'By God, Sir, so you have!' replied the Duke, before resuming his examination of the battlefield through his telescope.

Later that same day Lord Uxbridge had the remains of his leg amputated, and on his return to London he was advanced to the Marquessate of Anglesey and given a wooden leg. He went on to have 18 children and 73 grandchildren and lived to the noble age of 86. His wooden leg, THE FIRST ARTICULATED WOODEN LEG EVER MADE, can be seen

in the Military Museum at PLAS NEWYDD, the Marquess of Anglesey's elegant 18th-century home on the banks of the Menai Strait. The house, designed by James Wyatt, is now owned by the National Trust, and the Dining Room contains THE LARGEST PAINTING EVER COMPLETED BY REX WHISTLER, a panoramic 'mural', 58 ft (18 m) wide, painted on to a single piece of canvas.

Beaumaris

'Beaumaris is second to none'

GEORGE BORROW

THE COASTAL ROAD to BEAUMARIS from Menai Bridge is one of the most attractive in the whole of Britain. It winds and dips past elegant villas that gaze out across the water towards the dark green of Snowdonia, and there are tantalising glimpses of glittering blue sea through the trees.

Arriving in Beaumaris itself is no disappointment. The woods and the vistas open out in spectacular fashion on to the 'beau marais' or 'beautiful marsh' that gives the town its name. The Great Orme looms on the horizon, while yachts and pleasure boats bob up and down against the lowering black backdrop of the cliffs at Penmaenmawr on the mainland. Two miles (3.2 km) across the water is the Lavan sandbank, from where ferries and mail packets once crossed to Beaumaris, with passengers and mail for Holyhead and Ireland.

There is a genteel, undeniably 'English' feel to Beaumaris, which is hardly surprising since, at the end of the 13th century, the native Welsh inhabitants of the original village, called Llanfaes, were forcibly moved across

the island to start again at Newborough, freeing up space and material for King Edward's new castle.



On the seafront of Beaumaris, a short pier and a huge expanse of smooth green lawn, laid down on land reclaimed from the marshes in 1832, are overlooked by a dignified mix of elegant Georgian houses and impressive Victorian terraces. The latter were built by Joseph Hansom, of Hansom Cab fame, who also was responsible for the 'model' town GAOL of 1829, a shining example of a progressive and humane Victorian prison system. There were separate cells for women and children, each cell had running water, and you can still see the drunkards' cell, the soundproof isolation room, the whipping room and THE ONLY TREADWHEEL IN BRITAIN STILL IN ITS ORIGINAL POSITION. There is also an intriguing crank that was used as a particularly cruel and mind-numbing punishment, with a prisoner's meals being dependent on the number of turns completed - 2,000 for breakfast, 3,000 for supper and so on.

Apparently, no one ever escaped from Beaumaris Gaol. In 1862, the last inmate of the gaol to hang, a man called Richard Rowlands, put a curse on the nearby church clock as he went to the scaffold, vowing that the four faces would never again show the same time. And, indeed, until the

clock was given an overhaul in 1980, each face displayed a slightly different time.

Beaumaris was Anglesey's first county town. It was also an administrative and legal centre, and the restored Jacobean COURTHOUSE, established in 1614 and still in use as a magistrate's court, is THE OLDEST COURTHOUSE IN WALES and ONE OF THE LONGEST-SERVING COURTROOMS IN BRITAIN. When used for assizes, it was THE ONLY COURTROOM IN BRITAIN WHERE THE JURY SAT HIGHER THAN THE JUDGE.

In the porch of ST MARY'S CHURCH, which dates from the early 14th century, is the stone coffin of JOAN (1195-1237), daughter of King John, brought here from Llanfaes Priory at the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th century. She was married to Llywelyn the Great and was known in Wales as 'Siwan'.



Old Courthouse

At the entrance to the coach yard of the 15th-century YE OLD BULL'S HEAD INN is THE LARGEST SIMPLE-HINGED DOOR IN BRITAIN, 13 ft (3.96 m) high and 11 ft (3.35 m) wide.

Beaumaris Castle

Just Perfect



IF A MODERN computer was asked to design a perfect medieval fortress it would undoubtedly come up with BEAUMARIS CASTLE, considered to be THE MOST TECHNICALLY AND ARCHITECTURALLY PERFECT EXAMPLE OF A CONCENTRIC CASTLE IN EUROPE. The work of James of St George from Savoy, it was begun in 1295, the last of the iron ring of fortresses built by Edward I to contain the mountainous kingdom of Gwynedd. Beaumaris's role was to guard the northern approach to the Menai Strait.

Partly because it was never fully completed, owing to a lack of funds, and partly because of its low-lying position, Beaumaris Castle is a less spectacular sight than King Edward's other castles. More beautiful than intimidating in its inconspicuous position at one end of the main street, it complements rather than dominates the town. However, further examination reveals the remarkable strength and ingenuity of the design.

For anyone attempting to capture the castle, there are some 14 obstacles to overcome. The first line of defence is a deep moat, connected to the sea by a short canal, and at high tide supply boats could sail right up to the castle walls, protected by guns sited on a raised platform on the 'Gunner's Walk'. An iron mooring ring where the boats would tie up can still be seen hanging from the wall.

The next defence is an eight-sided curtain wall punctuated with 16 drum towers and two gates. The main gate in the south wall, protected by 'murder holes' through which boiling oil could be poured, is set slightly off centre,

so that anyone who succeeded in getting through the gateway would have to execute a sharp right and left before setting about the barbican, all the while under fire from above.

The walls of the huge inner ward, 16 ft (5 m) thick and over 40 ft (12 m) high, are riddled with narrow passageways that cry out to be explored, and hidden away in one of the massive inner towers is the castle's jewel, an exquisite vaulted chapel.

Beaumaris Castle is a World Heritage Site.

Penmon

Doves and Peace



ALMOST AS FAR east as you can go on Anglesey, at PENMON ('end of Mon'), there is a picturesque collection of medieval buildings, the ruins of a 13th-century refectory and a 16th-century domestic house, grouped around a beautiful Norman church. A cell was established in this lonely but lovely spot by a monk called St Seiriol, in the 6th century, and this later became an Augustinian priory. The remnants of St Seiriol's Well, where the original priory stood, can be found a short step away from the present church, itself begun in the 12th century.

Added to, and restored, at various times, Penmon today has a very special atmosphere. The church, which still retains its original Norman tower and pyramid cap, is approached through the small garden courtyard of the

Prior's House. Once inside, if you turn right you find yourself in 18th-century grandeur. Turn left, under a glorious Norman arch, and you are in the bare beauty of the 12th century, with crooked walls and delicate stone arcading. It is quite startling to find such superb Norman architecture in this isolated place and, just to add to the wonder, there are two finely sculptured Celtic crosses set up in the south transept which were brought in from the fields outside.

Across the road is a huge square dovecote, put up in 1600 by the local landowner, Sir Richard Bulkeley, to house up to 1,000 birds. Inside is an extraordinary stone pillar with projecting stones that provide a ladder giving access to the nests.



Nearby is a disused quarry that provided stone for Beaumaris Castle and the pillars of the Menai and Britannia bridges.

Puffin Island

A Tasty Morsel

FROM PENMON, A short, bumpy toll road leads to Anglesey's eastern tip at Black Point, where there is a lighthouse and

an old lifeboat station. A melancholy bell tolls a warning from the rocks in the middle of the treacherous waters that separate the point from Ynys Seiriol (Seiriol's Island), once known as Priestholm. St Seiriol had a sanctuary on the island, and some scant 6th-century remains can still be seen. He also had a chapel on the mainland at Penmaenmawr, and would travel between the two along a secret sand bank, now vanished beneath the waves of Conwy Bay.

The island is better known today as PUFFIN ISLAND, from the large colony of puffins that once nested there. In the 18th and 19th centuries the colony was almost eradicated by rats and by a food fad of the time - pickled puffin was considered a tasty delicacy.

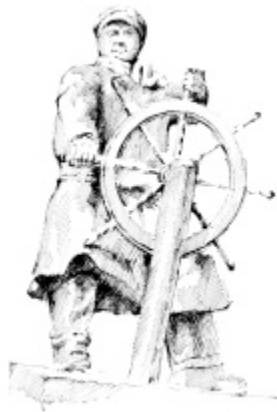
Moelfre

Gold Bullion and Gold Medals

MOELFRE IS A small village of pastel-painted stone cottages that tumble down to a pebble beach and tiny harbour popular with fisherfolk and yachtsmen. It sits on a rocky headland that has caught out many an unwary vessel rounding Anglesey on its way to or from Liverpool. The Moelfre lifeboat has been involved in countless rescue missions over the last 200 years, most famously in October 1859 when the steam clipper *Royal Charter* foundered on rocks just to the north, during a fierce storm. The lifeboat crew managed to save 39 lives before the ship broke up, but some 460 men, women and children perished. The ship was returning to Liverpool from the Australian Gold Rush with a cargo of gold, much of which is thought still to be on board the wreck. Frequent efforts have been made to try and recover the haul, allegedly to no avail, although

Customs Officers still keep a beady eye on the village for any signs of unexplained extravagance amongst the local inhabitants. The bodies of most of those who drowned are buried at Llanallgo, a little way inland, and there is a memorial on the headland.

Exactly one hundred years later, almost to the day, the Moelfre lifeboat crew saved the eight-man crew of the coaster *Hindlea*, which had hit rocks below the coastguard station, a rescue that earned RICHARD EVANS, the lifeboat coxswain, his second Royal National Lifeboat Institution gold medal.



Further north, on the cliff top at PORT LYNAS there used to be a semaphore station, part of a system which, in good weather, could relay messages from Holyhead to Liverpool in under a minute. Today ships bound for Merseyside stop here to take on board a pilot to steer them safely into port.

Amlwch

Copper Capital

AMLWCH, AN ATTRACTIVE little town on Anglesey's north coast, is THE MOST NORTHERLY TOWN IN WALES and, for much of the

18th and 19th centuries, was THE COPPER CAPITAL OF THE WORLD as well as THE RICHEST PORT IN WALES.

The source of its wealth, PARYS MOUNTAIN, sits scarred and lifeless just outside the town, a barren, dusty place riven with pits and craters like some sore on Anglesey's fair face. Evidence has been found that suggests copper was mined here some 4,000 years ago in the Bronze Age, making Parys one of THE EARLIEST MINES IN BRITAIN. And it was copper that brought the Romans to Anglesey. In the 1760s mining started up once again on a small scale and expanded to meet the growing demand for copper until, by the end of the 18th century, Parys Mountain was THE WORLD'S BIGGEST PRODUCER OF COPPER and the site of THE LARGEST OPEN-CAST COPPER MINE IN THE WORLD. The copper was of such a high grade that the Parys Mine Company minted its own coins known as 'Amlwch Pennies', stamped with a Druid's head on the front and its initials, PMC, on the back. These are now highly sought-after collector's items.



Today, the eerie pink and orange landscape can be explored with the help of a guide. Highlights include the remains of an engine house that once sheltered one of the earliest Cornish beam engines in Britain, and a brown lake full of sulphuric acid at the bottom of the derelict open-cast mine. The unearthly location has also attracted many film and TV companies. Parys Mountain has starred in the BBC television series of *Doctor Who* and films such as *Mortal Kombat*, *The Annihilation* in 1997 and *Infestation* in 2005.

Amlwch, in the meantime, has settled down to become a quiet seaside town popular with holiday-makers. The harbour that once sent copper around the world now bustles instead with pleasure craft and yachts.

The town's dry dock was created by enlarging a natural inlet and is thought to be THE ONLY DRY DOCK OF ITS KIND IN BRITAIN.

At Bull Bay is the unique church of OUR LADY, STAR OF THE SEA, built in the 1930s in the shape of an upturned boat by an Italian, G. Rinvoluceri, a former prisoner of war.



Holyhead *(Caergybi)*

End of the Road

THE LARGEST TOWN in the county of Anglesey, HOLYHEAD is not actually on the island of Anglesey but rather on Holy Island, which stands just off the north-west coast of Anglesey. Its origins are Roman, and the present-day St Cybi's parish church stands within the thick, 16 ft (5 m) high walls of a 3rd-century Roman fort. In the 5th century, a Celtic monk, St Cybi, built a monastic cell within the protection of these walls, where the existing church now stands. Dating mainly from the time of the Tudors, the church was restored by Sir George Gilbert Scott in the 19th

century, and contains some superb stained-glass windows by William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones.



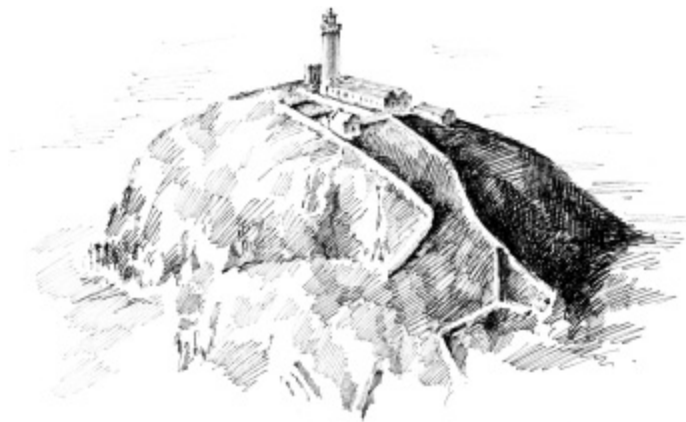
ADMIRALTY ARCH was erected in 1821 to commemorate the visit of George IV and to mark the end of Thomas Telford's road from London, now the A5. The railway arrived shortly afterwards, cementing Holyhead's position as THE PRINCIPAL BRITISH TERMINAL FOR THE CROSSING TO IRELAND.

Holyhead's North Breakwater, designed by James Meadow and completed in 1873, is THE LONGEST BREAKWATER IN BRITAIN. It is 1½ miles (2.4 km) long, shelters 700 acres (283 ha) of water, and took 30 years to build.

To the west is HOLYHEAD MOUNTAIN, AT 720 ft (219 m) the highest point in the county of Anglesey. At the top, as well as glorious views of Anglesey, Snowdonia, the Isle of Man and even, on a clear day, the Wicklow Mountains in Ireland, there are the remains of a hill fort and some ancient hut settlements. A little further west, 410 steps lead down from a car park to SOUTH STACK, a tiny islet linked to Holy Island by a metal footbridge, and crowned with a lighthouse built in 1809. The slow climb back up is rewarded with close views of the numerous sea birds nesting on the steep cliffs.



Admiralty Arch



South Stack

Penmynydd

Cradle of a Dynasty

IN THE 13TH century, Ednyfed Fychan, Lord Steward to Llywelyn the Great, was granted the lands around Penmynydd as a reward for his services. In 1385 his descendant, OWAIN AP MAREDUDD AP TUDUR, was born at Plas Penmynydd, in the original house on the site. Owain ap Tudur, the 'Rose of Mona', fought alongside Henry V at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 and was made head of the Royal Household. After Henry V died in 1422, Owain, by now known as Owen Tudor, and Henry's widow Catherine de Valois, daughter of the French King Charles VI, fell in

love and secretly married. They had three sons, Edmund, Jasper and Owen. Edmund became Earl of Richmond and married Margaret Beaufort, heiress to the Duke of Somerset and great-granddaughter of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster.



Their son, born at Pembroke Castle in 1457 ([see Pembroke](#)), ascended the throne of England in 1485 as Henry VII, exactly 100 years after his grandfather was born at Penmynydd, finally fulfilling Merlin the Wizard's prophecy that a man from Anglesey would one day sit upon the English throne.



In a chapel of the village church of St Gredifael are the grand alabaster tombs of Henry VII's great-grand-uncle Gronw Fychan ap Tudur and his wife Myfanwy. Over the years pilgrims have removed bits of the tombs in the belief that they are bestowed with healing powers. There is also a

colourful stained-glass window illustrating the royal regalia of the English throne, the Tudor rose and the portcullis of the Beaufort family. Lettering in Welsh around the window translates as 'unity is as a rose on a river bank and a house of steel on a mountain top'. Ty Dur, or Tudor, is Welsh for house of steel.



Aberffraw

Lost Splendour

TEN MILES (16 KM) away on Anglesey's west coast an old grey stone, single-arch packhorse bridge leads into the little fishing village of ABERFFRAW, ancient capital of the Kings of Gwynedd. Celtic Britain was ruled from here for hundreds of years, from not long after the Romans left until the time of Llywelyn the Last and Edward I. Today, little remains to show of the glittering royal court except an arch in the church of St Bueno said to come from the palace of the Princes.

Nearby, beneath the nave of the church at LLANGADWALADR, lies CADFAN, ruler of Gwynedd between AD 616 and 625. His tombstone bears the Latin inscription *sapientissimus opinatimus omnium regum* - 'wisest and most renowned of all kings', and lays claim to being THE OLDEST ROYAL TOMBSTONE IN BRITAIN. The village is named