

## GWYNEDD, AKA NORTH WALES



### *Caernarfon Castle,*

stalwart symbol of English sovereignty, is one of four castles built in Gwynedd by order of King Edward I to quell the unruly Welsh—these castles, Caernarfon, Conwy, Harlech and Beaumaris came to be known as the Ring of Iron.

Caernarfon was the most important of these, being the administrative center for this rebellious northern region of Wales. Hugely expensive to build (the cost to construct Caernarfon is estimated to have been \$38,000,000 in today's currency) they were state of the art examples of military construction, the finest in Europe. The King's master mason was James of Saint George, not only a renowned builder (the term architect had not yet been coined) but a military engineer.

The site chosen was near that of Segontium, a Roman fortress (established in AD 77, abandoned in 367) and contained the ruins of an 11th century Norman motte and bailey castle.

Caernarfon Castle is unique in layout and architectural character. The lay of the land predicated a long, narrow form with two 'wards' rather than the symmetric form with inner and outer walls used to build the other castles.

It was unique also in the polygonal shapes given to its seven major towers and the turrets that rose above them. Round towers would have been more defensible, but Caernarfon, the symbol of royal power here, was designed to impress and the ostentatious array of towers and massive entryways do just that.

Unlike Conwy and Harlech Castles which were built upon ridges of hard sandstone, Caernarfon's site was flat and underlain by mudstone which was unsuitable as building material.

The stone used for most of the fabric is a pale grey carboniferous limestone which was quarried from numerous outcroppings in North Wales including some along the coast of the Menai Strait where stone could be quarried and readily transported by boat to the castle site on the Seiont River. The well-bedded limestone would have required minimal dressing by masons.

Notice the four bands of differently colored stone in the towers and curtain walls, these bands are composed of reddish and yellowish sandstone and are said to have been inspired (like

the polygonal towers) by similar masonry features of the walls of Constantinople.

Construction commenced in 1283. Not only was the castle built but the town which grew alongside it was also walled. Work of this magnitude (some of the castle walls are 20 feet thick) required an army of stonemasons and laborers which were recruited from several counties in England.

In 1294 the uncompleted walls were breached by Welsh insurgents but the castle was quickly retaken and the work continued until it was terminated in 1327, leaving the castle unfinished—the state in which it has remained ever since.