

The Association of British Counties

The Caernarfonshire Eagles:  
Development of a Traditional Emblem and County Flag

by

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This purpose of this essay is to prove the validity of the famous three golden eagles in fess on green associated with the county of Caernarfonshire as the county emblem and make the case for their registration as a traditional county flag. To achieve the aim this report will investigate both the ancient origins of this symbol, its association with the county of Caernarfonshire and its modern legacy.

The origins of the emblem of the three eagles arranged in fess on a green field revolve around the ancient King of Gwynedd, Owain Gwynedd, to whom the symbol was attributed as his coat of arms. Owain Gwynedd was born around 1100 and became King of Gwynedd in 1137<sup>i</sup>. However, although heraldic devices and arms started being used in Wales from 1150 they did not start becoming common-place for nobility until 1300<sup>ii</sup>.

Despite this there is a wealth of evidence for the use of this device to symbolise Owain Gwynedd in the High Middle Ages. Mediæval Welsh nobility was very keen to prove its pedigree by being able to trace their ancestry back to the princes of the ancient Welsh kingdoms<sup>iii</sup>. As such there are a number of examples of the Welsh aristocracy only a few of centuries later using these attributed arms as a way of symbolising their dynastic links to Owain Gwynedd.

The main sources for the mediæval appearance of this symbol as the arms of Owain Gwynedd come from the heraldic manuscripts where many aristocrats sought to formalise their pedigree. These have

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<sup>i</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Owain\\_Gwynedd](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Owain_Gwynedd)

<sup>ii</sup> Francis Jones 'The Development of Welsh Heraldry' (Heraldry Society, 1958)

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

been compiled and collated in the authoritative work of former Wales Herald of Arms Extraordinary Michael Powell Siddons. In his work 'The Development of Welsh Heraldry' he finds the earliest reference to the arms to be in the late fifteenth century work of the bard Gutun Owain<sup>iv</sup>.

The first ever depiction of these arms appears to be a brass memorial for Maredudd ap Ieuan ap Robert, a supposed descendant of Owain Gwynedd who died in 1525, which can be found in Dolwyddelan Church<sup>v</sup>. The same church also has an early seventeenth century<sup>vi</sup> stone monument for Wynn of Gwydir, descendants of Maredudd from sixty years later, that also features the eagles<sup>vii</sup>.



Whilst the earliest full description of the arms (citing charges, colours and attribution) comes from the manuscript of Thomas ap Llywelyn ab Ithel circa 1562 and the earliest painting must be no later than the death in 1564 of bard and deputy herald, Gruffudd Hiraethog<sup>viii</sup>. The arms are also fully described or painted in the following manuscripts<sup>ix</sup>: Willian Cynwal, circa 1570-1580; Willian Ilyns, circa 1534-1580; George Owen of Henllys, circa 1586-96; Edward Puleston, circa 1590-1604; Simwynt Fychan, circa 1530-1606; Thomas Jones of Fountain Gate (the self proclaimed "principal

<sup>iv</sup> Michael Powell Siddons 'The Development of Welsh Heraldry: Volume I' (National Library of Wales, 1991) p288

<sup>v</sup> John Marsters Lewis 'Welsh Monumental Brasses' (National Museum of Wales, 1974)

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.churchinwales.org.uk/parishholding/bangor/b052-en/history-en/A-brief-history-of-St-Gwyddelans-Church>

<sup>vii</sup> Siddons 'The Development of Welsh Heraldry: Volume I' pIIb

<sup>viii</sup> Siddons 'The Development of Welsh Heraldry: Volume II' pp418-419

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid

herald for all Wales”), circa 1572-1608; Lewys Dwnn (bard and deputy herald), circa 1588-1613 (this was the era he conducted heraldic visitations in the area).

Another notable physical appearance comes from the Blayney Room of Gregynog Hall (in Tregynon, Montgomeryshire). In this room are a series of carvings of arms of ancient Welsh heroes from whom the Blayney family claimed descent – further illustrating the desire of Welsh nobility to prove their pedigree – including the attributed arms of Owain Gwynedd. These carvings date from 1636<sup>x</sup>.



Whilst the eagle emblem can clearly be seen to have had widespread acceptance as the symbol for Owain Gwynedd from the High Middle Ages onward, further investigation shows that the origins of the emblem may stretch further back into the history of the area.

In one theory the Eagles are often associated with the arrival of the Romans into North Wales. The Romans built the Segontium fort, located in modern day Caernarvon, in 77AD<sup>xi</sup>. The fort potentially helped inspire the name of the later town, and thus county, as 'caer' means 'fort' in Welsh, the whole

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<sup>x</sup> <http://keithblayney.com/Blayney/Room.html>

<sup>xi</sup> <http://www.segontium.org.uk/>.

name meaning 'fort opposite Môn (Anglesey)'<sup>xii</sup>. Additionally it had even been speculated that the name of the town may have been connected to the title of Caesar<sup>xiii</sup>.

Building the modern Caernarfon Castle began in 1283, it is said that during its construction the body of Roman Emperor Magnus Maximus was reportedly found<sup>xiv</sup>. A year later the Eagle Tower was completed. The Eagle Tower had three turrets that historically had a stone eagle on top as decoration<sup>xv</sup> - perhaps inspiring the eagles in fess arrangement.

The second theory as to the original origin of the eagles is drawn from the ancient Welsh folklore of the region. The ancient name for the Snowdonia region (the Snowdon Massif), at the very heart of both the ancient kingdom of Gwynedd and the county of Caernarfonshire, was 'Eryri' which translates as 'land or nest of eagles'. The eagles of this region themselves became a national emblem and according to folklore if they circled high victory would be forthcoming, but if they flew low and cried then defeat for the Welsh loomed<sup>xvi</sup>.

Furthermore these eagles were directly attributed to Owain Gwynedd himself in Bardic poetry of the time. Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr (1155-1200) was a court poet to Owain Gwynedd and in one elegy refers to him as "The golden dragon of Snowdonia of eagles' spears, The eagle of fervent warriors"<sup>xvii</sup>. Llywarch ap Llywelyn (1174-1220) claims in his poetry to Llywelyn the Great that Merlin

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<sup>xii</sup> Anthony David Mills 'Dictionary of British Place Names' (Oxford University Press, 2003)

<sup>xiii</sup> Frederick William Hackwood 'The Story of the Shire: Being the Lore, History and Evolution of English County Institutions' (H. Cranton, 1921) p262

<sup>xiv</sup> Arnold Joseph Taylor 'The Welsh Castles of Edward I' (Continuum International Publishing Group, 1986) p78

<sup>xv</sup> Reginald Allen Brown 'Castles from the Air' (Cambridge University Press, 1989) p66

<sup>xvi</sup> James MacKillop 'Dictionary of Celtic Mythology' (Oxford University Press, 1998)

<sup>xvii</sup> Elin Jones 'Poets of the Princes: Volume III – Gwaith Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr I' (Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1991)

prophesised that a heroic, English-slaying king would come from the "...lineage of the eagles of Snowdonia" which in the next line he equates with "Among the grandsons of Owain"<sup>xviii</sup>.

Finally the Princes of Gwynedd would eventually take on the title of 'Lords of Snowdonia/Eryri'<sup>xix</sup>, which when considering the Welsh name for the area would effectively make the princes 'Lords of the land of Eagles'.

It is thus safe to conclude that the exact design of the golden eagles on green is a complete design several centuries old and one that functions as a long-standing clear symbol for Owain Gwynedd. However it also becomes patently clear that the origins of the eagles both goes further back in time and lies tied to the history and nature of the area itself. It would be likely that the local use of the eagles in Roman symbolism and Welsh myth played off each other and together made them a very powerful and relevant symbol for Owain Gwynedd to be associated with.

Importantly this link does serve to imply that the eagles were a traditional symbol of the area and the people from very ancient times, even if the exact design of three golden eagles on green would not become standardised until the early sixteenth century. Over time this exact design would, in turn, become directly representative of the county of Caernarfonshire itself.

In 1415 the Battle of Agincourt was fought in which the Caernarfonshire units were reputed to have fought under a banner of three golden eagles on green in honour of Owain Gwynedd. Michael Drayton records this in his work 'The Battaile of Agincourt' in 1627<sup>xx</sup>.

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<sup>xviii</sup> Elin Jones 'Poets of the Princes: Volume V – Gwaith Llywarch ap Llywelyn 'Prydydd y Moch' (Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1989)

<sup>xix</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Llywelyn\\_the\\_Great#Marital\\_problems\\_1230](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Llywelyn_the_Great#Marital_problems_1230)

<sup>xx</sup> Michael Drayton 'The Battaile of Agincourt' (Charles Whittingham, 1893 (first published 1627)) p33

By the early twentieth century the design can clearly be seen to have remained in the public consciousness as the county emblem when, in his 1920 work on county identities 'Story of the Shire', Frederick Hackwood calls the three golden eagles of Caernarfonshire as an "authentic" and "significant" badge of the county, as well as reciting their association to the Romans of antiquity<sup>xxi</sup>.

Caernarfonshire County Council came into being in 1888 and at some point in its history it adopted and used the three eagles in fess on green unofficially<sup>xxii</sup>. This is recorded in C. W. Scott-Giles's 1933 'Civic Heraldry of England & Wales'.



However, he appears to attribute these arms to Caernarvon town whilst describing the town arms, which can be seen on 1903-1906 cigarette card illustrations<sup>xxiii</sup>, for the county.



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<sup>xxi</sup> Hackwood 'The Story of the Shire: Being the Lore, History and Evolution of English County Institutions' p262

<sup>xxii</sup> Charles Wilfred Scott-Giles 'Civic Heraldry of England and Wales' (Dent, 1933) pp184-185

<sup>xxiii</sup> <http://www.briantimms.net/cigarettecards/imagesba/carnarvon.gif>



When considering the proof offered by the cigarette card illustrations this seems to be a simple mix up on the part of Scott-Giles. Nonetheless even the town arms feature a golden eagle on green in the crest. The three eagles emblem was used by other county institutions as well, here featuring on a 1940s Caernarfonshire Police Constabulary helmet plate<sup>xxiv</sup>.



When Caernarfonshire County Council achieved official arms from the College of Arms in 1949 the three golden eagles in fess on green featured in the centre of the shield<sup>xxv</sup>.



This shield also features in the background the arms of Owain Gwynedd's grandson, Llywelyn the Great, whose arms had already become used as the arms for the entirety of modern Wales.

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<sup>xxiv</sup> <http://www.britishpolicehelmet.co.uk/id1.html>

<sup>xxv</sup> [http://www.civicheraldry.co.uk/wales\\_pr74.html#caenarvonshire cc](http://www.civicheraldry.co.uk/wales_pr74.html#caenarvonshire_cc)

As has been already mentioned previously the use of an eagle as an emblem for the area seems to have been an ancient one stretching back to ancient British folklore and Roman legacy in the area. However the use of this specific design for the county still goes back several centuries.

Whilst Drayton does mention several unlikely county banners in the rest of his 'The Battaile of Agincourt' work, some symbols do hold up owing to the pre-existence of his described device in the county in question. Caernarfonshire is one such example where it is clear that Drayton not only did not invent a new device but he had employed one with a clear link to the county. Even if there is a level of doubt as to the veracity of Drayton's account of the flag being used in the fifteenth century it is certainly true that by the time of his writing in the early seventeenth century this valid historical symbol had obviously gained acceptance as the emblem for the county. The design has remained in the public mindset and been used in passing; for example its unofficial use by the local council, until it was formally granted to Caernarfonshire County Council by the College of Arms.

Although Caernarfonshire County Council ended in 1974, the use of the design or references to it, have continued to symbolise the county. Caernarfonshire County Councils replacement, Gwynedd



County Council, features an eagle in its civic crest as a continued symbol of one of its constituent areas<sup>xxvi</sup>.

In more recent times the original banner of Owain Gwynedd has become a common suggestion to serve as a county flag for Caernarfonshire. Even before the proposal by the Association of British Counties<sup>xxvii</sup>, others had independently raised the idea<sup>xxviii</sup>. Bringing the story right up to date the Association of British Counties has been contacted by a local man who has been keen to get this design flying in county and registered. Furthermore the same man is forming a Caernarfonshire Association in order to promote the flag once it is registered and has already received commitments from a number of companies including slate producers, tourist sites and pubs indicating a local desire to fly the design.

In summary this essay has shown that by studying the history of the arms of Owain Gwynedd the case for the traditional registration of the banner as county flag for Caernarfonshire is very strong.

The pedigree of the design itself dates back to at least the fifteenth century and it has a strong relationship with the history of the area before this. Although originally arms attributed to a person this design has become associated with the county itself over time, much as Owain Gwynedd's grandsons' arms became those of the whole of Wales. In this case we can conclude that the design has been recognised as the county emblem from at least the early seventeenth century, if not the fifteenth century. Furthermore the design has remained an authentic and significant badge of the county to the present day and has highly relevant roots that go back millennia to the eagles of Welsh folklore and Roman antiquity.

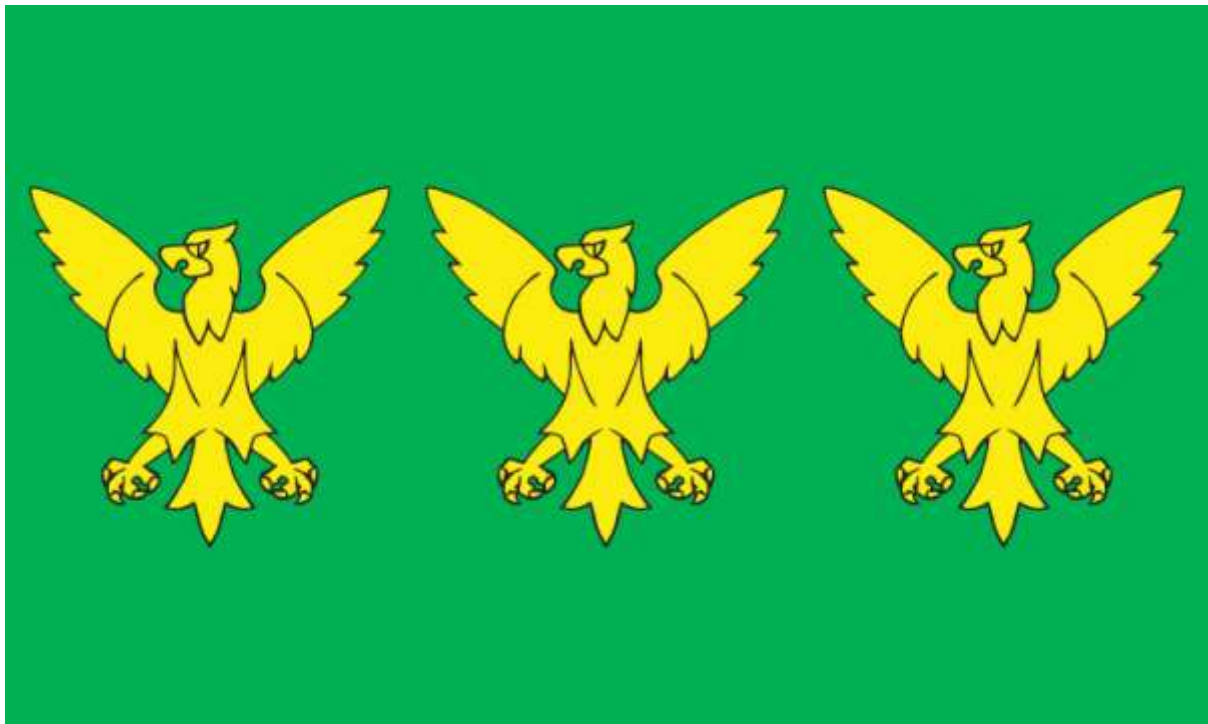
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<sup>xxvi</sup> [http://www.civicheraldry.co.uk/wales\\_7496.html#gwynedd\\_cc](http://www.civicheraldry.co.uk/wales_7496.html#gwynedd_cc)

<sup>xxvii</sup> Jason Saber 'Flagless Counties 2011' (Association of British Counties, 2011) pp9-13

<sup>xxviii</sup> <http://www.alternatehistory.com/discussion/showpost.php?s=5d12bdbba026c537fed7a5093c4d9bc5&p=3710147&postcount=6078>

This essay concludes by calling for the design of a green field with three golden eagles in fess to be recognised as the valid traditional flag for the historic county of Caernarfonshire in light of the sheer weight of evidence as to its ancient origins, long-standing association and continued relevance to the historic county.



### Appendix: Timeline

- 77AD – Romans built the Segontium Fort in Caernarvon
- 1100AD – Owain Gwynedd likely born
- 1137AD – Owain Gwynedd becomes King of Gwynedd
- 1170AD – Owain Gwynedd dies
- 1150AD – Heraldic devices introduced to Wales
- 1200AD - Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr, first poet to associate the Snowdonia eagles with Owain, dies
- 1220AD - Llywarch ap Llywelyn, poet who directly associated the eagles with Owain, dies
- 1230AD – Llywelyn the Great begins to add ‘Lord of Snowdon’ to his styling
- 1283AD – Work begins on modern Caernarvon Castle, body of Roman Emperor reportedly found
- 1284AD – Eagle Tower at the Caernarvon Castle completed
- 1415AD – Caernarfonshire units supposedly use the design as a flag at the Battle of Agincourt
- 1497AD – Gutun Owain, who first alludes to the arms in poetry, dies.
- 1525AD – Arms depicted for the first time as a memorial brass in Dolwyddelan Church
- 1562AD – Thomas ap Llywelyn ab Ithel first describes the arms
- 1564AD – Gruffudd Hiraethog has painted the arms by this time.
- 1627AD – Drayton records the flags use for the county at Agincourt in his ‘Battaile of Agincourt’
- 1636AD – Arms appear as one of the series in the Blayney Room carvings
- 1888AD – Caernarfonshire County Council comes into existence, uses the arms unofficially
- 1920AD – Hackwood calls the design an “authentic” and “significant” county badge
- 1949AD – Design featured as central element in formal grant of arms to County Council
- 2011AD – ABC requests the design be registered as a traditional county flag

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