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BEACON WATCH TOWERS ON THE NORTH WALES COAST

BY GEORGE LLOYD

THESE towers are situated at Whitford, Abergele, the church turret of Llandrillo-yn-Rhos, and Degannwy.

In the past there has been a good deal of uncertainty as regards the history and date of the construction of the three round towers of Whitford, Abergele, and Degannwy and this article is an attempt to give a practical solution of their origin and approximate date.

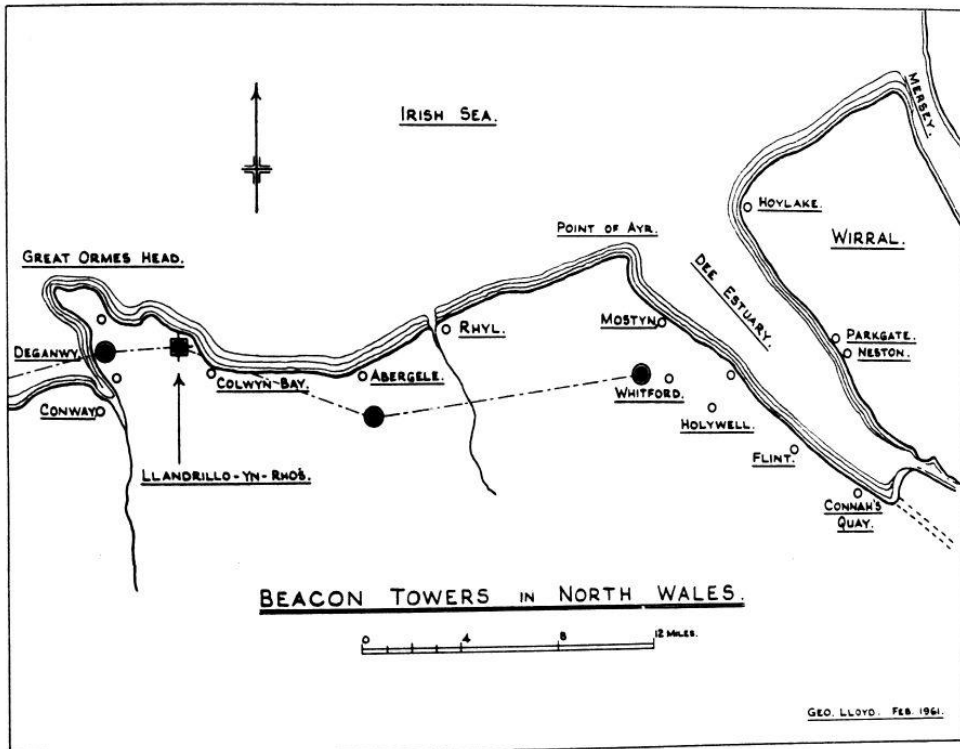
The first tower with which we are concerned is that on Garreg Hill, about three-quarters of a mile west of Whitford, 809 ft. above O.D. and commanding a view of the river Dee, the old Hoyle Lake anchorage, the river Mersey, and as far as the Isle of Man in clear weather.

Thomas Pennant in his '*History of the Parishes of Whiteford and Holywell*', 1796, refers to it as a Roman Pharos which is illustrated by his artist Moses Griffith. His description of the tower is as follows :

'The Romans took advantage of this elevated situation and placed on its summit a Pharos, to conduct the navigators to and from Deva, along the difficult channel of the Setsia Portus. The building is still remaining. It is tolerably entire; its form is circular; the inner diameter twelve feet and a half; the thickness of the walls four feet four inches. The doors or entrances are opposite to each other; over each is a square funnel, like a chimney, which opens on the outside, about half-way up the building. On each side is a window. About four feet from the ground are three circular holes, lined with mortar, as is frequent in Roman buildings; and penetrates the whole wall, for purposes now unknown. Within are the vestiges of a staircase which lead to the floors, of which there appear to have been two. Along such part of the upper, which was conspicuous from the channel, are eight small square openings, cased with free stone (the rest of the building being of rude lime stone, bedded in hard mortar) and each of these were separated by wooden panels, placed in deep grooves, the last still in perfect state. In each of these partitions were placed the lights, which the Romans thought necessary to keep distinct, or to prevent from running into one, lest they should be mistaken by seamen for a star. *Periculum in corrivatione ignium, ne fidus existimetur.* To the building is very evidently a broad and raised road, pointing from the east; and near its upper end are the marks of a trench, which surrounded and gave protection to this useful edifice. It certainly had in later times been repaired, or perhaps applied to some other use, for in one part is a piece of timber which could not have been aboriginal'.

This description by Pennant is certainly illuminating, but for once in a way he entirely erred as regards the date and origin of this tower which he looked upon during the whole of his life (1726–1798).

In 1897 it was restored and an inscription in stone over one of the doorways records that : ‘ This Roman Pharos was restored by Llewelyn, III Baron Mostyn, in commemoration of the sixtieth year of the glorious reign of Victoria, Queen and Empress, June 20th, 1897 ’. Tradition dies hard for even in recent times we see that Pennant’s romantic story was still accepted.



The question arises as to how Pennant came to believe that the ruined structure he saw was a Roman lighthouse, for the masonry is certainly not earlier than the year 1600 and what is still more surprising is that the origin of the tower had been completely lost in a matter of 130 years—but this is not a singular case in local history.

Again, on Robert Williamson's sea chart of the Dee and Mersey estuaries dated 1766 the actual site is marked 'Whitford Mill', showing a round tower with a wooden post on the top, signifying a ruined windmill. This, too, is an entirely erroneous title for Pennant was only forty years of age at the date of the chart and surely if it had been a mill, he would have mentioned it. The structure does not even conform with that of a windmill. The Royal Commission of Ancient Monuments, 1912, suggested that it was a beacon-tower of the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. Canon Ellis Davies in his '*Prehistoric and Roman Remains of Flintshire*', 1949, states: 'There can be no doubt, however, that the tower, like several others in north Wales belongs to a much later period. It may have been erected in the sixteenth century or beginning of the seventeenth century'. Again, Edmund Vale in his information sheet, Travel Association Series 1948, suggests that these circular stone structures were watch towers of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries.

The next tower to consider is the one at Abergele, situated on the hill, Bron-y-Berllan, 583 ft. above O.D. Samuel Lewis in 1833 states that it is on a hill, Coppayr-Wylva—'The mount of the watch tower'. Again W. Thompson Watkin, writing in the *Archaeological Journal*, 1886, Vol. XIV, p. 285, states the following: 'I consider it to be a Roman Pharos, but styled a "Wind Mill", a building which has received some alterations in the last few centuries'.

Bezant Lowe in his *Heart of North Wales*, Vol. II, 1927, states: 'According to popular tradition it was a windmill, but more probably it was a watch tower, erected as far back as the twelfth century, when Owen Gwynedd occupied the heights of Parc-y-Merch and from which he fought many fierce battles with Henry II. The tower is round and has two entrances on the north and south respectively. It has two storeys and in the upper storey were four windows and a fire place. It is about 30 ft. high and the masonry is of rough limestone rubble with some bricks embedded in the mortar'. Now here again, the story that it was erected in the twelfth century can be entirely discounted. The very fact that there are broken bricks in the mortar must date the structure not earlier than the year 1600. It commands a broad view of the coast and Irish Sea.

We now pass on to the medieval church of Llandrillo-yn-Rhos, situated about 150 ft. above O.D. The tower of this church was

re-erected in 1552. It contains a stone turret standing above the embattled parapet and had an emplacement adapted to receive an iron fire-basket. We may assume that this turret was added to the tower about 1600 and undoubtedly used as a beacon. The use of this church tower turret was essential in giving visual communication between the Degannwy and Abergele towers as the hills between these two towers prevented direct observation.

Finally we come to the isolated ruined round tower at Degannwy, situated on a ridge about 200 ft. above O.D. and half a mile north of the ruins of Degannwy Castle. It commands a view of the estuary of the Conway, the entrance to the Menai Straits and out into the Irish Sea between the Great and Little Ormes and the church of Llandrillo-yn-Rhos due west. It has been inadvertently stated in guide-books as an outpost to the early medieval castle of Degannwy which again can be discounted. On a sea-chart of 1748 it is marked as a windmill, which it never was; but on Royal Ordnance maps 1922, one inch to the mile, it is marked as a 'watch tower' and this appears to be the precise title, for all watch-towers were able to signal to each other by means of beacons when danger approached.

The local story is that the tower was built by the Danes. Thomas Pennant in his *Tours in Wales* states: 'Not far from hence (Degannwy), on the top of a low hill near Bryniau is an ancient tower. Its form is circular; its height about 20 ft.; the diameter 12 ft. (internal). Its walls compose only two-thirds of a circle, the rest is open to the top and the finishing of the walls complete without any appearance of there ever having been a door, and this opening is to the land. Within are marks of two floors. Round the inside are three rows of square holes, none of which pass through the building. Its walls are of great thickness and the mortar appears very ancient. I cannot offer any conjecture about its use; but describe it in order to exercise the talents of others'. There is still evidence of one doorway but the opposite one has disappeared in the ruins.

Bingley thought it was built in the seventeenth century and might have been a windmill. Samuel Lewis in 1833 states: 'At a short distance from the castle (Degannwy) are some small remains of a circular tower, or half-moon battery, apparently of later date than the ruins of the castle'.

In the latest *Caernarvonshire Inventory*, Vol. I, by the R.C.A.M., it states that: 'The Degannwy Tower is about 200 ft. above O.D.'

on the south-west end of a low ridge near Bryniau Farm. It has rough coursed purple grit walls, about 16 ft. high with internal set-backs at 7 ft. and 12 ft. 6 in. In plan it forms a 240 degrees sector of an annulus, 11 ft. 6 in. internal diameter, with 4 ft. 0 in. thick walls open to the north-east. The purpose of the tower is unknown'.

We shall now consider the reasons for the building of these beacon towers. What was their purpose?

History relates that our coasts and shipping were more or less subject to piracy for centuries, especially in the first half of the seventeenth century when James I and Charles I allowed the Elizabethan Navy to become so depleted that our shipping and coasts were at the mercy of pirates. In *England under the Stuarts* 1960, p. 174, G. M. Trevelyan states: 'Though our armed trading ships showed stout fight against pirates of every nation, the royal navy did almost nothing to protect them even in the Channel. Between 1609 and 1616 Turkish pirates from Algiers guided by English renegades, took 466 of our merchant vessels; in 1625 they carried off a 1,000 of our seamen as slaves and took twenty-seven vessels in ten days. Even the shore itself was not safe from insult. Pirates rode, ravaging and kidnapping, up the wooded creeks . . . Nor was the "Turkish enemy" the only danger of our merchantmen in home waters, but the pirates of Dunkirk from the coast of Spanish Flanders, were scarcely less dreaded'. It was a turbulent period in our history for we are also told that the Irish Sea was infested with these freebooters who carried out spasmodic raids on our coasts from their lairs in Ireland and the Isle of Man.

There are four references in the 'Gwydir Papers' to piracy on our north Wales coastal sector. One letter dated 1624 relates: 'Copy of a pardon, by Letters Patent, granted to Thomas Chedell of Beaumaris for piracy upon the high seas, for which he is penitent and refers himself to the King's mercy, being very young and drawn into it by others', and later on in the same year a letter refers to 'Thomas Cheadle who has taken out a pardon for piracy on the high seas committed eighteen years ago'.

Another letter dated 1647 refers to Bardsey Island asking to free it from taxation 'for being an island, it is subject to pirates, which are even now upon the coast, and is forced to defend itself'.

In one other letter dated 1649, reference is made to a dispute between the Earl of Leicester and Lord Bulkeley, and states: 'that

there were goods in Anglesey which were in danger of being taken away by Wexford pirates'.

In the first 40 years of the seventeenth century, law and order in this locality rested upon the powers of Sir Thomas Mostyn and his successor Sir Roger Mostyn.

Sir Thomas Mostyn was born in 1535 and died in 1618. He was a Sheriff of the counties of Flint, Caernarvon, and Anglesey; a Magistrate for the counties of Flint, Denbigh, and Anglesey; a Muster-Master and Custodian of Crown Arms and Armour in Flintshire, and a Member of the Council of the Marches from 1603 until his death. Holding all these important positions and being the largest land owner from the Dee to the Conway, it would be his responsibility to protect the inhabitants and coastal shipping from pirates whose lairs were in the creeks of the Isle of Man and Ireland.

Sir Roger Mostyn (1559–1642) succeeded Sir Thomas and in that rare book *The Mostyns of Mostyn*, by the late Lord Mostyn, 1925, we are informed that 'all local improvements received his personal and careful attention which included defence against piratical raids, then common, and the patrolling of the highways then infested with bands of armed thieves'.

From this information regarding the activity of pirates, it is apparent that these beacon watch-towers were built in the time of Sir Thomas Mostyn and were manned to alert, by flame or smoke, the countryside and shipping assembled in the Menai Straits, the estuaries of the Conway, the Clwyd, the Dee, and the Hoyle Lake which was the anchorage for the then rising port of Liverpool. They were probably erected, not as independent units, but to communicate with one another by beacon when danger was imminent from pirates and marauding bands over a stretch of coast of about 50 miles, on which were situated the notable houses of Mostyn, Talacre, Penrhyn Old Hall, Gloddaeth, and Bodysgallen.

There is much in common between these three towers as regards design and construction :

1. The internal diameters are about 11 ft. 6 in. to 12 ft. 0 in.
2. The walls at the base are approximately 4 ft. 0 in. thick.
3. Each of the towers had a ground floor with a first and second floor on heavy timber joists.
4. All the walls are of rubble construction.
5. The towers have or had two entrances at the ground floor opposite to one another.

6. In the Abergele and Degannwy towers, the off-sets in the walls are of internal construction, whereas those of the Garreg tower are of external construction.

7. The height of the Garreg and Abergele towers are about 25 ft., but the Degannwy tower is now much ruined at the top portion and on the east or land side. It is now no more than 17 ft. in height.

8. The walls of each tower are vertical, and although they have been dubbed windmills in the past, they do not conform with windmill construction whatsoever.

In the past, much romance and story have been woven round these towers, but the fact remains that the masonry and construction intimate a date not earlier than 1600, and we can assume that they were erected sometime in the first decade of the seventeenth century as beacon watch-towers.

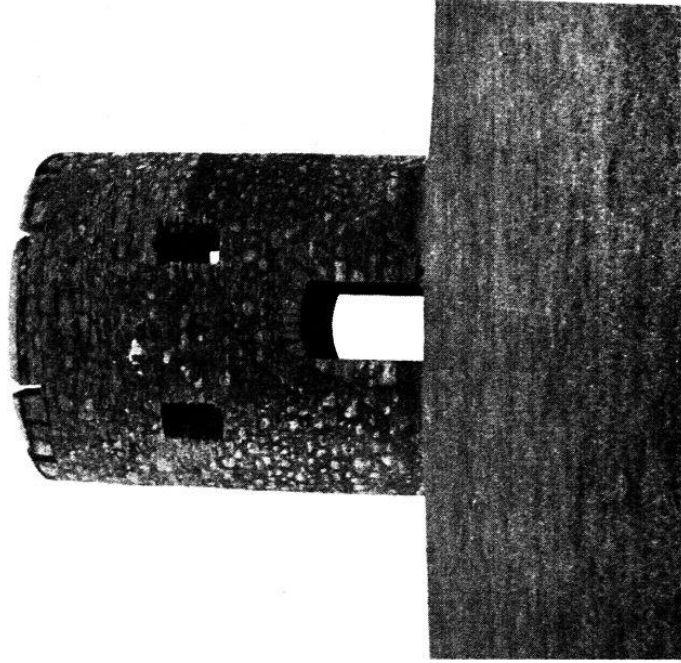
ADDENDUM

Since writing the foregoing article I have gleaned further information with regard to two other beacon watch-towers on Anglesey and Lleyn.

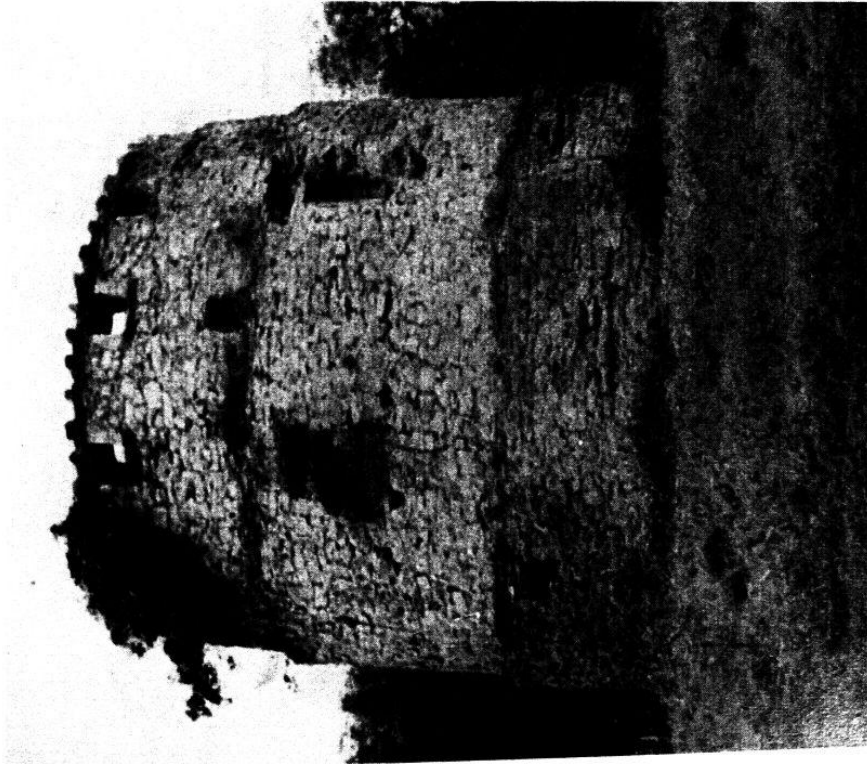
The Anglesey tower was situated three-quarters of a mile south south-east of Berw Ychaf about 180 ft. above sea level. An article on Plas Berw appears in *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 1908, p. 387, in which a description of this tower is given in an undated manuscript history of Berw preserved at Carreglwyd and is as follows: 'Near Berw Ychaf there stands an ancient tower . . . The farmers say that it was a mill tower . . . It stands on a commanding brow visible in all directions for a considerable distance. The masonry is massive, but common; solid, strong, and geometrically good; but presenting no remarkable feature . . . The tower has traces of two floors above the ground . . . We fail to perceive in this structure any indication of its ever having been a mill, and at the same time must confess our inability to construct any theory of its probable intention of use'.

On 27th August, 1907, members of the Cambrian Archaeological Association visited the tower and in *Arch. Camb.* 1908, p. 77, it states: 'Tower—A short halt was made by some of the party to explore this building, one of two floors now open to the sky, probably erected at the beginning of the seventeenth century and used as a watch tower against the approach of roving pirates who then infested the Irish Channel'.

PLATE VII

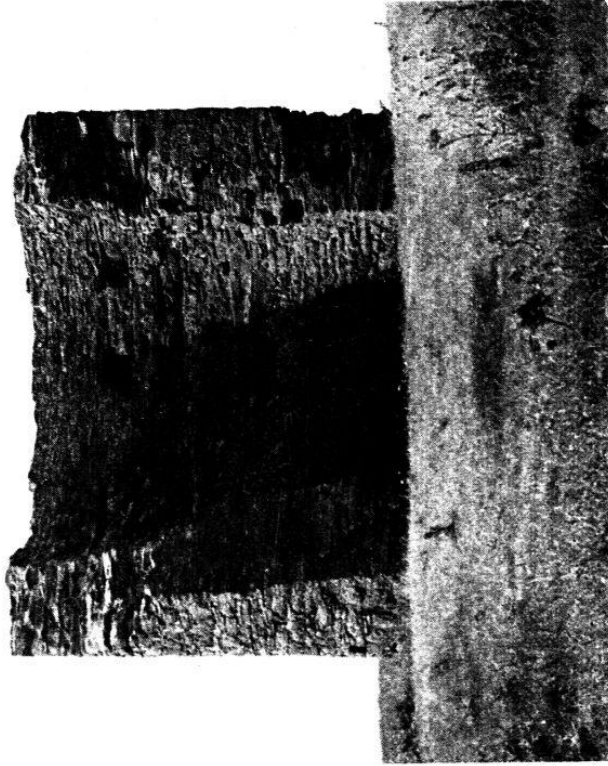


(b) Abergele Tower

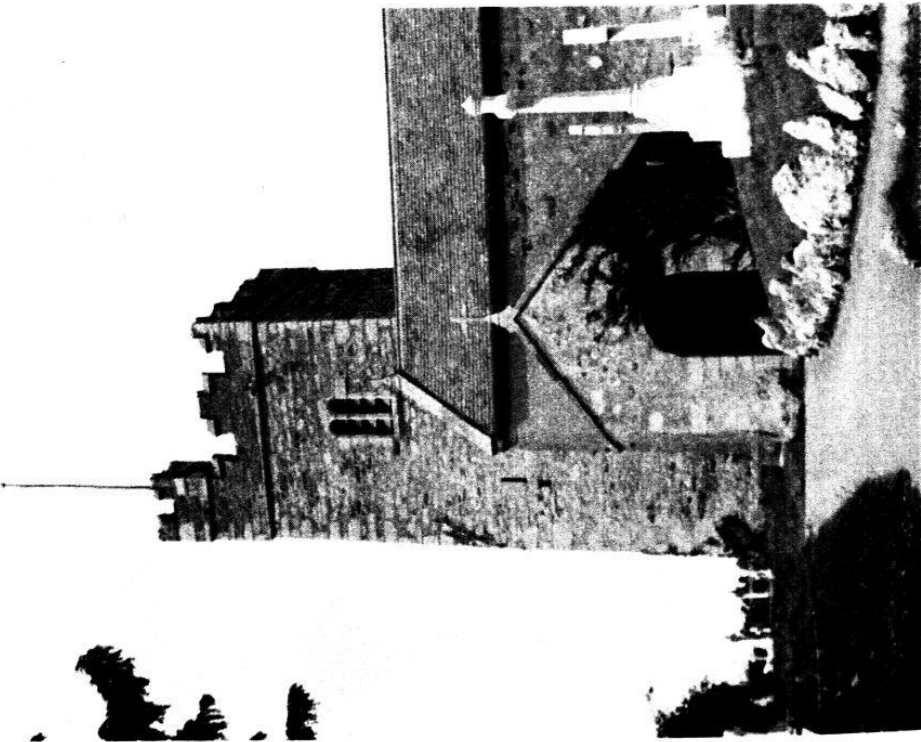


(a) Whitford Tower

PLATE VIII



(b) Degannwy Tower



(a) Beacon Turret, Llandrillo-yn-Rhos Church

Doctor Leslie W. Jones of Llanfair-pwll kindly informs me that this tower was demolished in 1920.

A further reference to the tower appears in *Arch. Camb*, 1910, p. 410, and it also states that there was a similar type of tower, much ruined, at Portmadoc overlooking the Glaslyn.

The tower on Lleyn is situated on Foel Vawr about 400 ft. above sea level near the village of Mynytho overlooking the anchorage of St. Tudwal's Road. It is built of rubble with two floors and has an internal diameter of about 12 ft. with walls about 4 ft. thick. There are two doorways at ground level, one of which has steps in it which might be a later insertion, and externally the walls have a slight batter with a single off-set inside. It is interesting to note that Holyhead Mountain can be seen from this tower.

There is a strong local tradition that it was a windmill and that it was working about 1810. Another tradition is that it was built to watch the pirates. There is also a legend that the Devil interfered in the rebuilding of it and that the mill was never finished.

It is possible that in the late eighteenth century the tower might have been adapted to serve the purpose of a windmill, but owing to its small size, production would be limited and it would soon have fallen into disuse.

There appears to be little doubt but that it was originally built as a watch-tower for its dimensions and construction are similar to the towers already referred to. It is probable that all these towers were used for some other purposes when the threat from piratical raids ceased in the last half of the seventeenth century, and hence their true origin was soon lost to the memory of man.

Much credit is due to the Misses Keating of Plas-yn-Rhiw who have recently reconditioned the tower at their own expense. I have to thank Mr. A. Colin Gresham, M.A., and Mr. A. H. A. Hogg, M.A., for their observations and dimensions regarding the Mynytho tower.

I am inclined to think that there was another of these towers on Holyhead mountain, for Thomas Pennant in his *Tours in Wales* states: 'On Pen y Gaer Gybi, or the summit of the mountain, are foundations of a circular building strongly cemented . . . It seems to have been a Pharos . . .' but then Pennant sadly erred in describing the Whitford tower as a Pharos. It is possible that there were other such towers on the Welsh coast which have been entirely demolished and the site lost.

In conclusion, it is fairly obvious that the Berw and Mynytho towers are in the same category as those at Whitford, Abergele, and Degannwy. All are similar in construction and size, erected on high ground overlooking their respective coastal sectors and each able to signal to the nearest tower when piratical raids were imminent. It is of interest to note that all these towers overlooked safe anchorages where coastal shipping assembled in times of danger. There is little doubt but that they were all built in the early part of the seventeenth century.