

Master James St George

Master James St George is a shadowy character for whom great claims of military engineering have been made, not only in respect to Harlech, but all King Edward's works in Wales. However, when the hyperbole has been stripped away, there is really very little left to connect him with the grand strategy of building - as modern tourist guides claim - 'an iron ring of castles' around Gwynedd. Early records seem to indicate that his father, Master John, was a mason who worked on castles in Savoy in the 1260s. The "St George" is believed to be a reference to the castle of Saint-Georges-d'Espéranche, located southeast of Lyon. 'Believed' is the word best used for the career of James, of which we actually know very little. It is therefore no surprise to find that King Edward I is believed (without the slightest evidence) to have met Master James whilst visiting Savoy in 1273. Despite this alleged fortuitous meeting, Edward did not employ him until the late 1270s^{*1}.

The earliest references in English records to James St George are found in 1278, when he is referred to as an engineer (*ingeniator*) or mason (*mazun*). His two less well waged colleagues were only called engineers. In April 1278, he was recorded as travelling to Wales 'to organise the works of the castles there' and 'to visit the castles of Flint and Rhuddlan'. Only four royal castles were being built at this time: Flint, Rhuddlan, Builth and Aberystwyth, so this hardly makes him the genius behind them all. Between 1278 and November 1280 he oversaw the building works at Rhuddlan by 'view and testimony', which would suggest that he was supervisor rather than designer. Indeed on 27 July 1279, William Perton and Master James St George were recorded in that order as 'keepers of the king's works at Rhuddlan'^{*2}. On 19 May 1280, the order of precedence was kept, but this time William was described as a royal clerk and James as 'keeper of the works of Rhuddlan'^{*3}. On 1 November 1280, he joined the masons at Flint castle, receiving 2s a day every day, while the other masons only received as much as 10d per day and some only 5d. Furthermore the others only received payments for six days a week. James was paid for seven.

It has been argued that St George became a 'master mason' on 9 December 1280, when he was granted simple protection for seven years^{*4}. Despite this, he left Wales for Savoy in 1287 when this protection ran out. In doing this he is alleged to have left the building of Harlech castle to its own devices and only signed the work off on his return in 1289. All this, of course, is mere supposition.

After the Welsh war of 1282-83, Master James was employed again at Conway where he seems to have been under John Condover of the Wardrobe. In the meantime, on 3 December 1283, John Bonvillars was paid 'to oversee the king's castles in Wales'^{*5}. As late as 1286 work was said to be undertaken at Conway by Lord John Bonvillars and Master James. Their shared responsibility is hinted at by the fact that around the same time John ordered 500 wheelbarrows bought in Conway for Caernarfon, while Master James bought only seventeen^{*6}. During 1284-85, Master James had also been in charge of building a hall and royal apartments for £320, of which Master Richard the Engineer and Master Henry Oxford claimed another £100 for the carpentry^{*7}. In 1285-86, James was paid a mere £64 for adding apertures to and minor building works in the apartments within the

^{*1} The standard work on this is Taylor, AJ., *Castle-Building in Thirteenth Century Wales and Savoy* [Oxford, 1978]. This has been seriously challenged in Coldstream, N., 'James of St George', *The Impact of the Edwardian Castles in Wales* [Oxford, 2010], 37-45; 'Architects, advisers and design at Edward I's Castles in Wales', *Architectural History* [2003] XLVI, 19-36.

^{*2} *Calendar of Various Chancery Rolls: Supplementary Close Rolls, Welsh Rolls, Scutage Rolls, 1277-1326* [1912], 178.

^{*3} *CPR 1272-81*, 370.

^{*4} *CPR 1272-81*, 418.

^{*5} The roll of daily household expenses, 1283-84, TNA, E.101/351/12.

^{*6} The counter-roll of Adam de Wetenhale, 1285-86, TNA, E.101/485/28.

^{*7} Pipe roll for 1286, TNA, E.372/131, rot 26.

fortress and repairing some 120 feet of the great wall near the castle well^{*8}. Again this hardly suggests that James was the military genius behind the plan of all the North Welsh castles. Indeed, Master James' far less omnipresent commands are seen more clearly in his order for John Flauner to cut the rock back near the river beneath Conway castle postern for £10. Although John went on to complete this and build the eastern barbican of the castle there is no evidence of the hand of Master James in the work. In fact, in the payments of this year, is one that mentions two small walls built in the ditch between the castle and the residence/chamber (*camera*) of Master James. He still appears to have been based in his chamber near the ditch at Conway in 1295^{*9}; hardly the luxurious habitation of the master builder of all the Welsh castles. Such a residence is not comparable with the multi-roomed and fireplaced hall of Otto Grandison at Conway which included passages (*alures*) within it. Although this hall was maintained by Master James it is hardly the same as being a master builder of fortresses and living within such a structure.

During the construction of Conway Master James was appointed master of the works in Wales (*magister operacionum in Wallia*) which brought with it a wage of three shillings a day - an increase of one shilling on his previous stipend. On 20 October 1284, Master James St George was described as a royal serjeant and his wage was guaranteed for life, and on his death 1s 6d was to go to his widow, Ambrosia, if she survived him. Simultaneously Master Richard the Engineer, another king's serjeant, was granted a shilling per day on similar terms^{*10}. Despite this, it should be noted that Master James' name does not occur once in relation to the construction of Harlech castle!

The next year, on 3 October 1285, John Bonvillars, the overseer of the king's castles in Wales, replaced Hugh Wlonkeslawe as constable of Harlech, a position he maintained until his drowning in August 1287 during the campaign against Rhys ap Maredudd. His widow then seems to have remained in charge of Harlech castle until 3 July 1290, when 100 marks (£66 13s 4d) were sent to James St George. Further Agnes, the widow of John Bonvillars, was ordered to hand Harlech castle over to James as the new constable. James held this position until 14 December 1293 when Robert Staundon took over. Therefore, if anyone was likely to have been the designer of Edwardian Harlech, it was Edward I, who stayed there several times before works began, or more likely Sir John Bonvillars, the castle overseer. Even then his death around August 1287 would mean that his widow was probably responsible for overseeing the work her husband had put in hand. All Master James did was take over the castle once the work was done.

In April 1295, James was overseer of the new castle built at Beaumaris, and on 20 August he was granted the North Welsh estate of Mostyn, Englefield, for the duration of his life^{*11}. Later he worked for Edward I in Scotland, probably joining him there around September 1298. In February 1302 he was appointed to oversee the new defences at Linlithgow castle and also worked at Stirling during the 1304 siege. By 20 May 1309, Master James St George, was recorded as recently deceased, when Mostyn was reclaimed by the Crown^{*12}. There is no record of James's wife, Ambrosia, receiving a pension after his death, so it is probable that she did not survive him. In short, the only thing this summary of James' career seems to show in relation to Harlech castle is that he enjoyed its constableness for three years after its completion.

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^{*8} The counter-roll of Adam de Wetenhale, 1285-86, TNA, E.101/485/28.

^{*9} Taylor, A.J., *The Welsh Castles of Edward I* [1986], 53.

^{*10} *CPR 1281-92*, 137.

^{*11} *CCR 1288-96*, 423.

^{*12} *CPR 1307-13*, 116.