PUTTING WALES ON THE MAP

A journey in the footsteps of Edward I's armies.

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The medieval Gough Map is the oldest recognisable map of Britain, and one of the great treasures of the Bodleian Library in Oxford. No one knows who created it or why, but it represents a quantum leap in map-making, which before it was largely theological – showing, for instance, England's position in relation to the Garden of Eden. Travellers needing practical information on how to get from A to B were dependent on 'itineraries' – lists of places that they had to pass through – supplemented by local guides.

One of the few accepted facts about the map, according to a new book by Nick Millea, is that it was drawn in the mid-fourteenth century. But, he adds, it may be a copy of a lost original which was created 70 years earlier, in the reign of Edward I, and conceived as a work of propaganda to underline Edward's claim to Wales and Scotland. This is partly based on the fact that the two major routes shown from England into Wales make little sense for ordinary travellers, but do tally with those used by Edward's armies when invading the country in 1277 and subduing later uprisings.

The more northerly of the two runs from Chester down to Cardigan, and links seven castles which were considered essential to the domination of Wales. It was this route that I decided to try and follow seven centuries on.

Edward gathered his army at Chester in July 1277, camping in the Saltney marshes. From here he marched to Flint, where work began on his first castle.

Time has done little to beautify this part of Wales, but if you turn your back on Flint's high rises and follow signs to the Castle Park Industrial Estate**,** you will find an evocative wind-blown ruin looking out onto the grey expanse of the Dee estuary. Though little remains apart from the corner towers and suggestions of the moat – dug by 1,800 'fossatores' – which surrounded it, you can get an idea of the presence it must have had when it

arrival, that Richard II surrendered to Henry Bolingbroke (Shakespeare refers to ‘the rude ribs of that ancient castle’). The castle survived largely intact until 1647, when it was decommissioned by Cromwell’s victorious forces.

The same is true of Rhuddlan Castle, ten miles away, though its ruins are more substantial and dramatic: in silhouette the raven-crowded east gatehouse resembles a knight in shattered armour resting on his sword. Edward arrived here to find a motte-and-bailey castle dating from Norman times, but rather than fortify it decided to build from scratch, using a new system of inner and outer walls which gave an extra line of defence. Many of his ideas were gleaned from castles he had seen on the Crusades, and were realised here and elsewhere by an architect of genius called Master James of St George, recruited from Savoy.

Rhuddlan overlooks the River Clwyd, which was diverted for over two miles so that the castle – like all the others on this route – could be supplied by ship. This was a vital consideration in an age when water provided a much quicker and easier means of transport than land, partly because the countryside was more densely forested than now: Edward’s army included 1,800 woodcutters whose job it was to clear a way for his fighting men.

Edward brought his first campaign to a successful end at Rhuddlan in November 1277, when the Welsh leader Llewellyn ap Gruffudd formally submitted to him. But five years later Llewllellyn took up arms again, and though he was killed and the rebellion defeated, the King decided that a more ambitious chain of fortresses was required to keep the country under control.

Certainly, nothing at Flint or Rhuddlan prepares you for the grandeur of Conwy Castle. After following the rugged coast road past Colwyn Bay, you reach the Conwy estuary and find yourself gazing upon a miracle of towers and crenellations in a setting of extraordinary romance. Standing on a steep platform of rock, with wooded hills behind it and neat lines of boats at anchor below, it is as cheering a sight as a monument to war could decently be.

The design of the castle is intriguing: its eight drum towers define two

entities. Edward's strategy, however, was to occupy Wales not just with garrisons but with whole settlements of English people, and Conwy survives as a magnificent fortified town with a medieval street system, enclosed by three-quarters of a mile of wall. All this was created in the course of four years, using up to 1,500 men.

At the same time, an even more monumental castle was being created twenty miles further along the coast at Caernarfon, which would become the main centre of government in North Wales. It is not just its size but its appearance which sets it apart from the others: the towers are angular rather than round, and the walls are patterned with bands of different-coloured stone. This may have been a deliberate attempt to evoke Constantinople, and bolster Edward's authority by associating him with the Emperor Constantine, whose father Magnus Maximus was said to be buried in the vicinity. If so, it shows the same belief in the power of propaganda as the Gough Map.

Caernarfon seems all the more massive because the wall which originally divided it in two has disappeared. But in other respects it is largely intact, and to walk along the enclosed passageways is almost to hear the clank of armoured feet on stone. As I climbed the vertiginous Eagle Tower in the driving rain and peered across the Menai Strait at a grey shape which could have been Anglesea, I had a strong sense of how far from home an English sentry must have felt.

The weather was no more hospitable as I drove south to Porthmadog: stone walls, sheep and deformed bushes took shape briefly before melting back into the mist, like a sodden parody of Wales. It was a relief to stop for the night at Castell Deudraeth, a funkified Victorian folly attached to Portmeirion Village which completely fails to replicate the discomforts of medieval life.

Criccieth, a few miles away, was one of Llewellyn ap Gruffudd's castles which fell in 1283 and was subsequently refortified by its English captors. Turner painted it – along with several others – on a tour of the country, and it

spectacular views along the coast, it is infused with a spirit of forlorn heroism, though the twin towers of the inner gatehouse are the only substantial part remaining.

One of the extraordinary things about these castles is how few soldiers were needed to defend them. Criccieth withstood an uprising in 1294-5 with twenty-odd men; Harlech, though far bigger, was normally garrisoned by 30. As long as supplies arrived from the sea, a siege could be resisted for years, and Harlech was brilliantly prepared for this eventuality, with a sheltered stairway running for 200 feet down to the sea gate.

Sadly, the sea has withdrawn in the intervening centuries to make way for a golf course and housing estate. But the castle's position is still splendid, perched on a rock whose steepness meant that it could only be attacked from one side, and James of St George took full advantage of its natural defences in perhaps the most beautiful of all his designs. The great corner towers are offset by four taller and more slender ones within, creating an awesome impression of power and elegance.

The most direct route from Harlech to Aberystwyth is along what is now the A470, but to follow the coast as Edward's army did is to enjoy the most magnificent scenery of this 200-mile journey. The surf-raked beaches of Barmouth give way to the immensity of Cardigan Bay and the basking sandbanks of the Dovey estuary, as the road climbs and winds along headlands deeply tinted in autumn with bracken, heather and gorse.

Of the seven castles, Aberystwyth alone feels completely uncherished. It was built between the sea cliffs and a marsh, and an early visitor – one Bogo de Knovill – complained in 1280 that it was 'shaken night and day by the great crash of waves'. Within a hundred years it had fallen into disrepair, and all that survives now is a gatehouse, a handful of doorways and some abstract wedges of stone, ignored by a town more devoted to seaside amusements. There is, however, a well-placed bench looking out onto the ocean, and if you concentrate hard on the grey horizon you can imagine a medieval ship

The final leg of Edward's road takes you past broad reaches of shoreline confronting the Irish Sea, and through the beguiling town of Aberaeron, with its splendidly painted Victorian houses and a delightful small hotel, the Harbourmaster. The day was fading when I reached Cardigan, and though its pre-Norman castle – rebuilt 25 years before Edward's arrival – is closed to the public while repairs are carried out, I was able to stand below the walls while a thin band of pink spread across the sky and gaze along the picturesque River Teifi as the King must have done. Did he dance a jig to celebrate what no other English monarch had achieved – or did he simply reflect on how much easier it would all have been with the aid of a decent map?