

PRINCES, POEMS AND PARAPETS

Conwy's mighty castle and town walls built by English King Edward I are just part of our story. As Chester based travel writer David Atkinson discovers when he visits the major new Princes of Gwynedd exhibition at Conwy Tourist Information Centre.

Gwydir Chapel, Llanrwst

Gwybodaeth Cymraeg

Ychydig iawn o bobl sy'n gwybod hanes Tywysogion Gwynedd. Eto, mae'r cyfnod yma yn un tyngedfennol yn hanes ein gwlad. Yng ngeiriau Helen Bradley, Swyddog Prosiect Twristiaeth Treftadaeth Cyngor Sir Gonwy: "Mae llawer o'r syniadau sydd gennym ni am ein hanes a'n diwylliant yn deillio'n uniongyrchol o'r cyfnod yma".

Mae arddangosfa newydd Tywysogion Gwynedd yng Nghanolfan Groeso Conwy (cyferbyn â'r castell) yn eich tywys drwy hanes cythryblus Gwynedd, Dyffryn Conwy ac Eryri yn oes y Tywysogion. Mae Rheilffordd Dyffryn Conwy yn ffordd gyfleus o deithio os oes arnoch chi eisiau ymweld â llefydd fel Eglwys Sant Crwst (Llanrwst), Eglwys Sant Mihangel (Betws-y-Coed) a Chastell Dolwyddelan, ac mi gewch chi olygfeydd godidog ar y ffordd! Bydd gwefan arbennig gyda map rhyngweithiol yn ogystal â llawlyfr newydd ar gael yn y gwanwyn.

IT'S ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS DYNASTIES IN WELSH HISTORY. THEIR STORY SPANS A PERIOD OF TUMULT AND CONFLICT FROM THE END OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE TO THE WARS OF INDEPENDENCE AGAINST EDWARD I.



Many events from this time shaped Wales in terms of its landscape, culture and heritage. Yet the lives and times of the Princes of Gwynedd, and their struggles against their neighbours both within and beyond Wales, remain one of the least known epochs in the story of Wales.

“The Princes presided over a period of dynamic change in the history of Wales. We owe so many of our notions of culture and history today to this period,” says Helen Bradley, Heritage Tourism Project Officer for Conwy County Borough Council.

Helen is showing me around the new Princes of Gwynedd exhibition at the tourist information centre in the centre of Conwy. The exhibition tells the story of the Princes using maps, documents and sound recordings to capture the spirit of the times. From a child-friendly

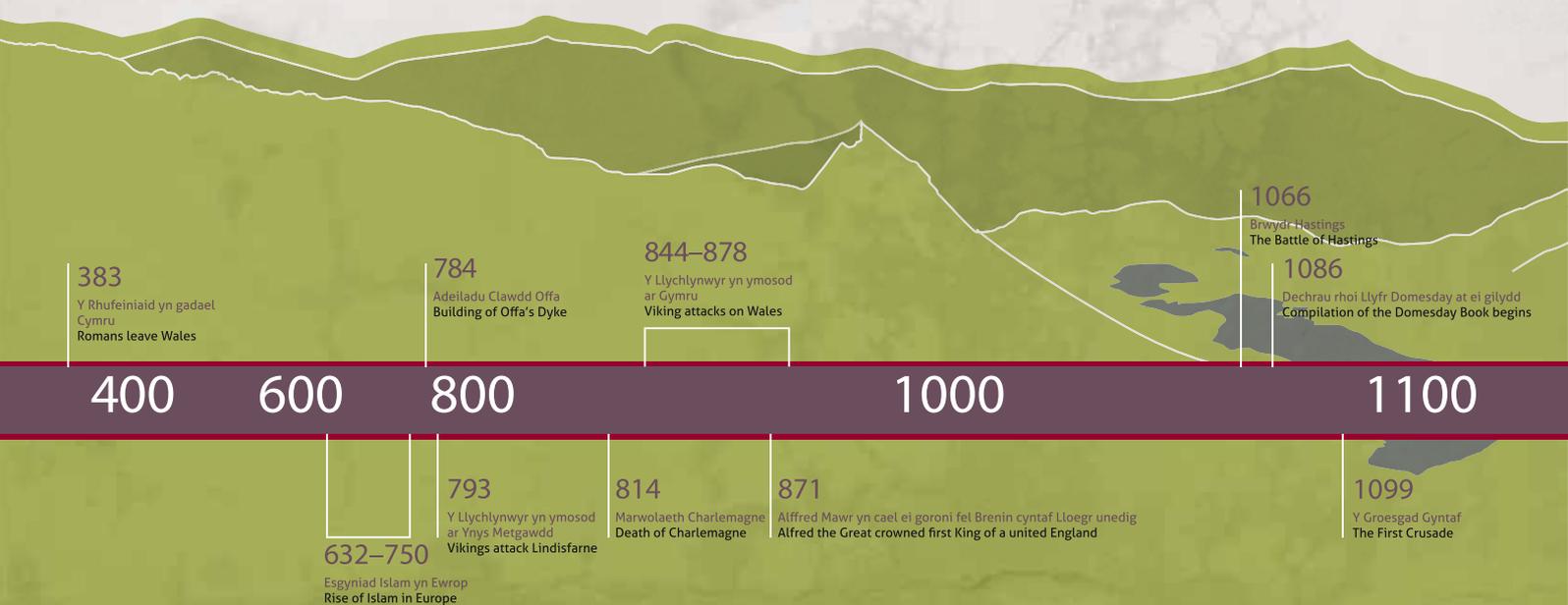
animation of historical soundbites to information about life in medieval Gwynedd during their reign, the exhibition acts as a gateway to a series of sites across Gwynedd, Conwy and the Snowdonia National Park.

“The Princes were tactical, strategic players on the European stage, reforming their lands and creating strong political alliances. They were not downtrodden victims cowering in the mountains,” adds Helen.

The Princes ruled over tribal kingdoms, surviving Saxon attacks and the construction of Offa’s Dyke along the Welsh-English border in the 8th century, Viking raids in the 9th century and widespread power struggles and in-fighting within Wales itself. It was not until the 13th century that the Princes finally rose to predominance, first with Llywelyn Fawr (the Great) and finally his grandson, Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, who was the first to be known by the title Prince of Wales. After his death, the new Welsh values of nationhood, language and law appeared

threatened forever. Indeed, it wouldn’t be until the rise of Owain Glyndwr in the 1400s that Welsh pride would be restored.

Helen goes on to show me round the second room of the exhibition, which is dedicated to the cultural legacy of the age of the Princes. Despite our dark image of the times, this era saw Welsh literature and art flourish. Indeed, Rhys ap Gruffydd convened the first ever bardic tournament in 1176, a precursor to the modern-day Eisteddfod. The Princes commissioned bards to write eulogies and praise poems, which helped to create a mythology around their image and ancestry.



One featured poem, recorded in medieval Welsh, is a praise poem for the Princes by Gynddelw Brydydd Mawr. It dates from 1170: "He is a spear striking on the battlefield, exalted in his praise ... His spear is blood-stained as he dispenses his anger."

After a brisk walk around the walls, a quick look into Aberconwy House, the town's oldest medieval merchant's quarters dating from around 1300, and lunch at L's cool little coffee and bookshop, I set out to trace the princes' legacy through the surrounding landscape. I take the scenic Conwy Valley railway line down to Llanrwst via Dolgarrog, the line celebrating its 150th birthday in June this year.

The route passes through an RSPB wildlife reserve, looking back towards Conwy Castle and Robert Stephenson's engineering-marvel railway bridge, before heading onwards through a picture-postcard landscape past Bodnant Garden. By the time we are approaching North Llanrwst station, the Gwydyr Forest is looming into view.

"It's a very different experience to explore Conwy by public transport, rather than driving," says Larry Davies, Community Rail Officer for Arriva Trains Wales, which is working with local bus companies to connect key locations along the princes' trail. "You get closer to the scenery, closer to history this way," he smiles.

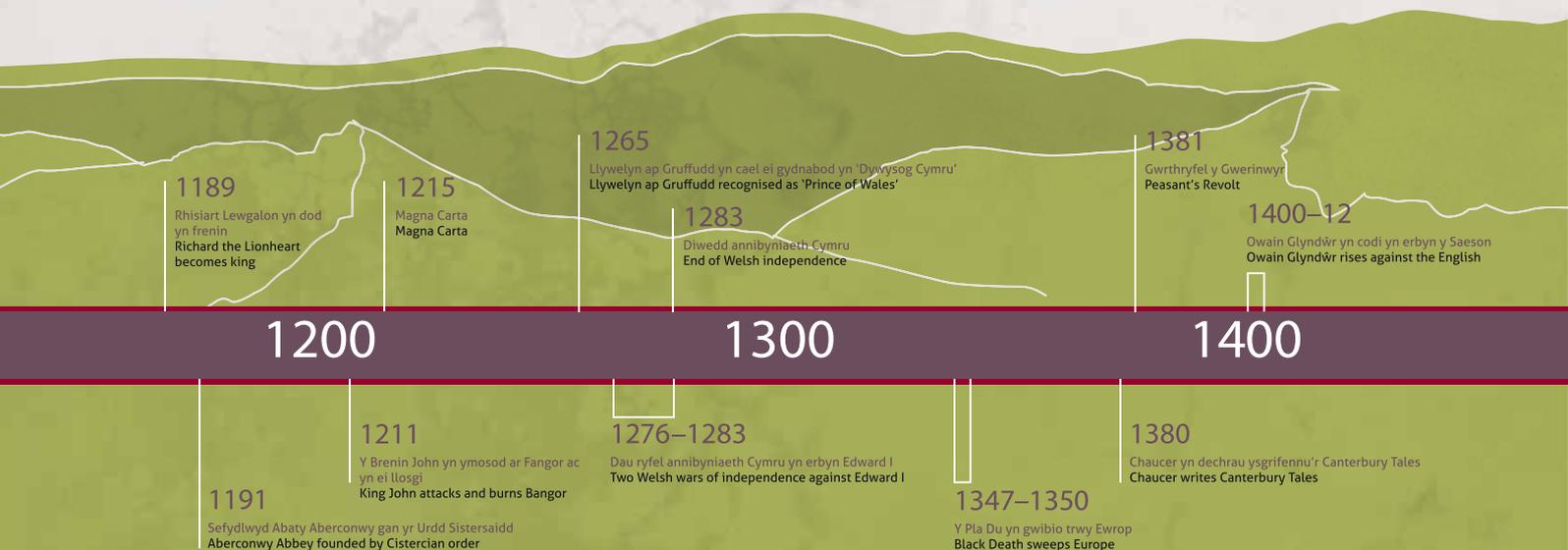
St Grwst's Church, dedicated to the 6th century Celtic saint who founded the church in Llanrwst, clings to the banks of the River Conwy. Gwydir Chapel, the stone-built chapel adjacent to the main



church and dating from 1633, houses the stone sarcophagus of Llywelyn the Great, who died in 1240 after a reign spanning four decades.

Llywelyn is regarded as one of the greatest Welsh princes, a powerful 13th century ruler who fought hard to unite his realm and to play a role on the wider stage, concluding treaties with rulers such as Phillip Augustus of France in 1212. Upon

his death, his body was buried first in Conwy and then moved to Maenan Abbey outside Llanrwst. When Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in the 16th century, Llywelyn's stone coffin was moved to the church in Llanrwst. His body was lost but the elaborately carved sarcophagus survives.





Dolwyddelan Castle



Elsewhere along the line, other locations help bring the story of the Princes to life. For example, St Michael’s Church at Betws-y-Coed features a 14th century limestone effigy of Gruffydd ap Dafydd Goch, while the stunning castle at Dolwyddelan was first built by Llywelyn Fawr and subsequently modified by Edward I. Both sites are open to visitors.

For an overview, a dedicated website with an interactive map and a new guidebook to sites associated with the Princes will be available from Spring 2013 for visitors to find out more.

Back in Conwy, I finish with a visit to the World Heritage Site of Conwy Castle, one of the cornerstones of Edward I’s iron ring of castles. A series of new artworks inside the castle ruins symbolise fragments of the story and add depth to the human story behind the facts of the history books. Llywelyn’s Coronet, a crown atop a tower of shields and swords in the Prison Tower by the artist Rubín Eynon, symbolises the

burning spirit of the people, while a rusted-iron sculpture of the head of King Edward I by Gideon Petersen in the King’s Chamber is a ghostly presence.

Standing on the defensive parapets of the castle, I look over the estuary towards the former castle site at Deganwy, a stronghold of the Princes, ransacked and ravaged by generations of invaders. Below is the busy harbour quayside. “Conwy was a bustling trading port in the late 13th century with communities of English, Welsh and other nationalities,” says Roy Williams, Head Custodian at Conwy Castle. “The castle had its own watergate entrance to allow access for people and supplies directly from ships.”

Roy and I climb the spiral stairs to the castle’s chapel, the weight of history around us, to be greeted with a new installation of stained glass, Garrison of Flowers. The three-pane window tells the story of the bloody fight between the Princes of Gwynedd and the English crown.

“By presenting the story of the princes to visitors to the castle, I’ve learnt that, like much of history, the story is not black and white,” adds Roy Williams. “I hope these artworks will make people think again about Welsh history – and maybe inspire them to find out more.”

We sit for a moment in contemplation on a semi-circular pew carved with verses in Welsh, English and French, the languages spoken in the new borough of Conwy in the 1280s after the Edwardian Conquest. In the fading light of late afternoon, one particular verse catches my eye.

It reads: “Let the eye pierce the mirror of the past – history’s shadow, phantom in the glass.”

What David did



PRINCES OF GWYNEDD EXHIBITION AT CONWY TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE

Open daily all year round:
10am - 4pm (winter opening)
9am - 5pm (summer opening)

(Further hubs at Caernarfon and Betws-y-Coed, will be completed by Easter 2013)

CONWY VALLEY LINE
www.conwyvalleyrailway.co.uk

CONWY TOWN WALLS
Among Europe's best preserved and most complete medieval town walls, Conwy's have UNESCO World Heritage status and measure about a kilometre in length. Explore them anytime, for free, and get a completely different look at Conwy's cobbled streets below.
www.walledtowns.co.uk
www.cadw.wales.gov.uk

ABERCONWY HOUSE
This fascinating museum is housed in a fourteenth century merchant's residence, thought to be the oldest town house in Wales. Hear the story of the daily lives of its occupants through the ages, and a few ghostly tales as well.
01492 592246
www.nationaltrust.org.uk

CONWY CASTLE
Medieval military architecture at its finest, Conwy Castle was built in the thirteenth century as part of Edward I's 'iron ring' of fortresses designed to subjugate the Welsh. These days invaders are welcome at this UNESCO World Heritage Site.
01492 592358
www.cadw.wales.gov.uk

Discover more

DOLWYDDELAN CASTLE
Built in the thirteenth century by Prince Llywelyn 'The Great', Dolwyddelan Castle was later captured by Edward I during his conquest of Wales. Conquer the steep hill and reward yourself with awesome views of the Lledr Valley and Snowdonia.
01690 750366
www.cadw.wales.gov.uk



CONWY SUSPENSION BRIDGE & TOLL HOUSE
Before Thomas Telford built the Conwy suspension bridge in 1826, the only way to cross the River Conwy was by boat. Today the bridge, which is traffic-free, and its toll house with Victorian-style interior, are looked after by the National Trust.
01492 573282
www.nationaltrust.org.uk



PLAS MAWR, CONWY
Built in the sixteenth century by a wealthy merchant, Plas Mawr is probably the finest surviving Elizabethan town house in Britain. With gatehouse, stepped gables and lookout tower outside; stunning plaster decoration and original furnishings inside.
01492 580167
www.cadw.wales.gov.uk



RHOS-ON-SEA HERITAGE TRAIL
Among the 25 historic sites on The Rhos-on-Sea Heritage Trail are St Trillo's Chapel, the smallest church in Britain; and the remains of Llys Euryn 5th century hill fort. A Heritage Trail leaflet is available from Rhos-on-Sea Tourist Information Point.



CADW'S CONWY APP
Cadw's new Conwy app is free to download to your iPhone or iPad and is designed to help you get the most from your visit. Uncover Conwy's jackdaw legend, explore the walled town by completing challenges and collecting points along the way, then send a virtual postcard to family and friends.
www.cadw.wales.gov.uk



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Look out for HistoryPoints QR barcodes at our heritage sites – on posts, walls, notice boards or in windows. Scan the QR barcode with your smart phone to receive an instant snippet of information about the site. To find out more and download the app, visit www.HistoryPoints.org

The Princes of Gwynedd project is led by Conwy County Borough Council in partnership with Gwynedd Council, Snowdonia National Park Authority and the National Trust, as part of Cadw's £19m Heritage Tourism Project which is largely funded by the Welsh Government and from EU Convergence Funds.