



# Sarum Seminar News and Views

## Exploring Northern Wales *by Nancy Pinkerton*

Right after Christmas Tim and I spent five days exploring northern Wales, and we highly recommend it as a destination. We had anticipated that the castles would be amazing, and they certainly were. Unexpected, but also thoroughly enjoyed, were the delightful little towns adjacent to the castles and walking the parapets of their 13<sup>th</sup> century walls, as well as the beautiful landscapes and the friendliness of the Welsh-speaking locals.

In Wales Edward I (reigned 1272-1307) built or renovated some 30 castles — which really should be called fortresses. Most are the distance of a day's horse ride from each other. With a car you can easily see two or three in one day. However, we recommend you linger a bit and enjoy the towns and other attractions. Because miles on a map don't necessarily translate well into actual travel time, both are mentioned to help with your travel planning. Our week was geographically constrained to northern Wales, with an afternoon in the medieval jewel of Chester while en-route back to Manchester airport.



Conwy Castle

We spent two nights each in Conwy and Caernarfon, which were perfect bases for exploring Welsh castles, copper mines, slate quarries and the Snowdonia National Park. Absent the winter storms, there are also an abundance of coastal, marine, and seaside activities to enjoy. If you are traveling by car, Conwy Castle is approximately an hour and twenty minutes (65 miles) from Manchester airport. Beaumaris Castle is reached by crossing the Menai Strait channel northwards from Conwy to the Isle of Anglesea, and is approximately 30 minutes (18 miles) from Conwy. Heading west from Conwy, Caernarfon Castle is about a 45-minute drive (25 miles). South of Caernarfon, Harlech Castle is about an hour ride (30 miles) including a quirky one-lane toll-bridge.

The castles are inexpensive to tour, open daily, well-staffed and offer an abundance of signage to help visitors understand what they are seeing. Road and city signs in northern Wales are signed in both English and Welsh, which proved to be both helpful and bewildering. Caernarfon is the seat of Welsh language and culture; here most residents use Welsh as their primary language. Through the third grade, only the Welsh language is used in the schools, after that English is taught in conjunction with Welsh for the rest of children's schooling. These four castles are in impressive condition, seeming to need only a roof and a few chimneys to be habitable.

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Caernarfon Castle

Their layouts are quite distinct from one another, each offering different strategic and functional aspects. All were built by Master James of St. George, a mason and architect from the Savoy. This region was well-traveled by Edward; it is where many of his relatives resided. The castles are compelling for their massive scale, the town walls that surround them, their ingenious battle-tested designs and their remarkably intact condition. What makes them even more amazing is to appreciate that they were built so rapidly and concurrent with so many others, in the last decade of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. For example, Conwy and Caernarfon were both completed in four years. We were astounded at the quantity of materials and labor involved and the organization required for transporting men and materials to so many construction sites simultaneously. It is easy to understand how Edward I broke the bank during this time of his reign.

**Conwy**, named for the river it faces, was our favorite of the four castles visited. We loved the combination of a large and awesome castle, an adorable walled village and a picturesque setting with harbor views in one direction and rolling hills ascending towards Snowdonia in the other direction. Begun in 1283, the castle and town walls were built simultaneously and both were completed in four and a half years. It has what might be considered an irregular shape, to accommodate the rocky base of the site it

occupies. Edward learned while accompanying his father on Henry III's unsuccessful Welsh campaigns that the provisioning of an army is the key to success. Conwy is a harbor town with a navigable river, and the foundations of Edward's 13<sup>th</sup> century quay are visible. With its position opposite the Llandudno peninsula, the harbor could be used and defended year-round.

**Beaumaris**, meaning pretty marsh, has a completely different layout than Conwy. Somewhat smaller, it features two concentric rings, both with towers, parapets and hundreds of arrows slits. Cleverly, the towers and entry points are offset from each other. Any invader who succeeded in breaking through the moat and exterior ring would have to make awkward turns to find the openings in the inner ring, while being shot at from above and trapped in barbicans separated by three portcullis gates. The layout is brilliant and the setting is lovely, with a moat and a seaside entrance protected by a tidal dock. As at Conwy, Edward wanted to ensure the provisioning of this fortress by sea. It was the last Welsh castle Edward initiated, begun in 1295. Nearly completed in 1298, it sat unfinished when Edward's attentions turned to Scotland. Work continued between 1306 and 1311, but the castle was never finished. The passageways between the walls were endlessly fascinating to explore. We imagined scurrying down these dark narrow openings, armed with

nothing more than a candle, a bow and a quiver of arrows, while storms pushed howling winds through the arrow slits and waves crashing against the outer walls.

**Caernarfon** (or Caernarvon) has two spellings, a confusion arising from a single “f” being pronounced as “v” in Welsh. This castle and its town were the largest of the four we visited. Like Conwy and Harlech, construction began in 1283, but it has a different style. The enormous 5-storey towers are, amazingly, topped by additional smaller towers, reaching a dizzying height. The construction features horizontal bands of different colored stones and the towers are polygonal rather than round. Apparently Edward was influenced by the look of Constantinople. In addition to the many towers, Caernarfon is protected by two drawbridges, six portcullises, five doors and numerous murder holes. No one was going to quietly slip into this fortress.

The accepted lore of the royal title “Prince of Wales” is that in 1284 Edward dragged a pregnant Eleanor from nearby Rhuddlan to the Caernarfon construction site to provide his new subjects with their own prince. Fortunately for Eleanor, she gave birth to a son, not a daughter, and that son survived. This tale doesn’t seem entirely plausible as an elder son, Alphonso, was still alive in 1284, and it would have been customary to give the elder son the newly conquered land of Wales. It is also hard to understand why the son of an unwanted English monarch would appease the Welsh citizenry, but that is the way the story is told. In 1301 Alphonso was dead and Edward II was granted both Wales and the earldom of Chester. Since then, the eldest son of the English monarch has been vested with the title Prince of Wales. Prince Charles was invested at Caernarfon in 1969 as the 21<sup>st</sup> to bear that title.

**Harlech** was the smallest of the castles we visited. It sits atop a huge rock outcropping a half mile inland from a broad sandy beach. The land in-between is occupied by mobile homes and a small golf course. At the time of its construction, though, the ocean waves crashed against the rocky cliffs on which Harlech sits. Architecturally, it shares components found in the other three castles we visited. It too was supplied by the sea, which enabled it to withstand sieges from the Welsh, the French and a seven year siege during the Wars of the Roses. It has concentric, offset, rings similar to Beaumaris and stunning views of Snowdonia that surpass those at Conwy. Two of its towers have towers atop them, similar to Caernarfon. It was quite spectacular.

Taking the long way back to Caernarfon via the Pass of Llanberis and Pen-Y-Pass added only about thirty minutes to our trip and allowed us to enjoy the

beautiful Snowdonia scenery. It was reminiscent of the Scottish highlands — or at least the parts we could see through the hail, rain, wind, sun, fog, clouds and rainbows! The Welsh weather was unpredictable, but thankfully it was neither cold nor snowing during our stay.



Harlech Castle

Two books to consult on Edward’s Welsh enterprise are: *The Welsh Castles of Edward I* by Arnold Taylor, and *Edward I* by Michael Prestwich. The latter is one of the Yale English Monarchs series. Travel plans can be made easily by consulting:

[www.conwy.com](http://www.conwy.com),  
[www.conwy-wales.com/tours.htm](http://www.conwy-wales.com/tours.htm),  
[www.caernarfon.com](http://www.caernarfon.com),  
[www.visitcaernarfon.com](http://www.visitcaernarfon.com).

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Editor’s note: If pronouncing Welsh is as mystifying to you as it is to me, you might find this site useful:

[www.britannia.com/wales/language.html](http://www.britannia.com/wales/language.html)

There I found that the dreaded double L in a name such as Llandudno is aspirated; meaning that you form your lips and tongue to pronounce L, but then you blow air gently around the sides of the tongue instead of saying anything. This in English is something like sounding L with a “th” in front of it. For the rest, try reading this:

Gwd lwc. Ai hop ddat yw can ryd ddys and ddat yt meiks sens tw yw. Iff yw can ryd ddys, dden yw ar dding ffaen and wil haf no problems at ol yn lyrnyng awr ffaen Welsh alfabet.

Good luck: I hope that you can read this, and that it makes sense to you. If you can read this, then you are doing fine and will have no problems at all in learning our fine Welsh alphabet.

## St. Bride's Library May Close

by Kathleen Much

My London home away from home, St. Bride's Library, is set to close if it can't raise £7 million for "redevelopment." St. Bride's is a quirky Victorian library devoted to the printing trade. It's not easy to find, tucked away in an alley off Fleet Street at the heart of the fifteenth-century printing district, and just round the corner from Christopher Wren's pretty little St. Bride's Church.

A BBC story in January said that the library "faces being sold, split up, and possibly even taken out of the UK." As it houses the largest collection of British type specimens in existence and a complete set of the registers of the Stationers' Company on microfilm, losing it would be a blow to researchers in publishing history.



The BBC said, "Among its nearly 200 collections are thousands of valentines, greetings cards, menus and posters, and more than 1,100 printed ballads from the 19th century." Charles Dickens's letters to his printer are held in the archives. The reading room gives access to most of the important reference works on printing and bookselling published in the past 200 years (and more). A portrait collection puts faces to many of the famous names in publishing since the sixteenth century.

St. Bride's Library opened in 1895 as both a technical library and a printing school that later became the London College of Communication. The college is now part of the University of the Arts London and doesn't seem to feel any responsibility for the library. St. Bride's was for many years one of the specialist collections of the Corporation of London, open free to the public. It is now operated by the St. Bride Foundation, which has applied to the UK Heritage Lottery Fund for half the needed money. A private appeal must raise the rest. Visit their website ([www.stbridefoundation.org/supportus](http://www.stbridefoundation.org/supportus)) for details.

The old stone building doesn't meet accessibility guidelines, and you have to climb down two flights of stone stairs, walk across a long corridor, and climb up two flights to get to the ladies' room. The closed stacks do not have adequate climate con-

trol to protect the collection, and the reading room can be stifling in London's summers. Reading microfilm in a dim, dusty storeroom, you feel that you are lost to the world of the twenty-first century. You almost expect Bob Cratchit to pop up from his desk with a quill pen, sleeve garters and eyeshade in place.

Modernization would be grand, but preserving the collection is the important aspect for scholars. I'd settle for a lift, air conditioning, and better storage if there isn't money enough for completely rebuilding the space. At this point, however, no solution has been proposed if only part of the £7 million is raised, and closure is a real possibility.

My research on Elizabethan and Jacobean publishers would still be limping along without the resources of St. Bride's. I can tell you it was a thrill to see Christopher Barker's bold signature and the records of his grandsons' apprenticeships on the microfilmed registers. Christopher (1529-1599) was Queen's Printer to Elizabeth I, and his son Robert was the publisher of the King James Bible in 1611.

I'm hoping that the British press, which is still called "Fleet Street" although most of the newspapers have moved out to the suburbs, will come to the rescue of its historical repository. T.S. Eliot's trust, the Old Possum Practical Trust, has pledged £65,000 to the appeal. About another £350,000 in pledges still leaves the appeal shy by more than £3 million.

If you ever want to see St. Bride's Library, I recommend an early visit. Even if the money is raised, the library will close for several years during refurbishment, beginning next year.

## SarumDoku Puzzle by Bob Nyden

Complete the grid so that every row, column and 3-by-3 box contains all the letters shown below. When the puzzle is solved, one of the rows or columns will spell an English location where may be found Kings and Queens, among others.

### BARDICGEM

D	A		R		E		
	M	R		A		D	C
					R		
		C	A		M		
	D	B	C		G	I	M
			D			C	
		G					
I	E			G	C	A	B
		M			R		I

## A Capital Adventure: Nara

by Linda Jack

This past December I enjoyed my first trip to Japan, which included visits to three historic imperial capitals: Nara, Kyoto, and Edo, now known as Tokyo. I was fortunate to travel in the good company of my long-time friends, Joan Piggott and Arnie Olds. Joan is a professor of Japanese history at the University of Southern California, specializing in the pre-modern period, considered to be prior to 1600. She proved to be an invaluable translator of Japanese and an interpreter of history and culture. On various parts of the trip other American and Japanese historians and archaeologists joined us to explore several pre-modern historical sites in the countryside.

Our capital adventure began at Heijō-kyō, the site of Japan's first permanent capital, on the main island, Honshū. In 710 this newly established capital, now known as Nara, was laid out to be a grand city that would serve as the political, cultural, and economic center of the country. Based on Chinese examples, the capital contained a palace complex, Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, imposing public buildings, bustling markets, houses, and roads – including several grand boulevards – that were laid out on a grid pattern. The city covered an area of about 316 acres. The population is estimated at around 100,000, about 2% of the population of the archipelago (Piggott 193). By way of comparison, in the year 800 only two cities in Europe had a population of over 50,000 people: Cordova with 160,000 and Constantinople with 300,000 (Chandler 10).

Earthen ramparts that stood some sixteen feet high enclosed the imperial palace compound. Access was gained through twelve gates. The main entrance was the imposing Suzaku Gate. Placed in the middle of the south wall, the gate provided access to the most important buildings in the imperial complex, which were used for political ceremonies and banquets. Each building was on a podium, with a tiled

Suzaku Gate



roof and pillars lacquered in vermilion in the style of the contemporary Chinese Tang Dynasty. There were also private quarters and gardens. The excavation of one garden revealed a stone-lined shallow pond in the center surrounded by viewing pavilions.

Great Hall of State



Elites of the Nara period would have experienced a rich material culture including many items imported from China, Korea, Persia, and other stops on the Silk Road. So rich was the treasure of the imperial family that the tennō (heavenly sovereign), Shōmu (701-756), commissioned the building of a large repository for his treasures – the Shōsōin at Todaiji. The Shōsōin was constructed log-cabin style, with a raised floor. Its wooden construction regulated the temperature and humidity by expanding and contracting with changes in the climate.

Among the Shōsōin's treasures were the gifts that were brought back to Shōmu and his predecessors by the diplomatic missions to the mainland. The treasure included musical instruments, textiles such as splendid ritual gowns, game boards inlaid with gems and mother of pearl, masks, carvings, mirrors, glassware, ceramics, and religious texts. The Shōsōin was in a very real sense the eastern terminus of the Silk Road. It is now on the UNESCO register of World Heritage Sites as one of the Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara.

Selected treasures of the Shōsōin are still exhibited annually at a conference at the Nara National Museum. In recent years the Imperial Household Agency Office of the Shōsōin Treasure House has been involved in the reproduction of ancient textiles from the Nara period. This reproduction project has been successful in large part due to the cultivation of the Koishimaru silkworm from the Imperial Cocoonery of Her Majesty the Empress, which produces the finest threads that closely resembles in quality the silk material in the Shōsōin.

Nara was also a great center of learning. A university provided education in the Chinese Confucian tradition. Educated elites, both men and women, wrote extensively: histories, poetry, and verse. Poetry was composed for visiting dignitaries, to remark on everyday events, and most

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poignantly, to reflect on the intimate emotions of husbands, wives, lovers, and children. An example of the latter is the final stanza of a poem in the *Man'yōshū*, an 8th century compilation of about 4,500 Japanese poems. The author is a husband who must depart his home, leaving his wife behind:

*Oh yellow leaves  
Falling on autumn hill,  
Cease a while  
To flutter in the air  
That I may see my love's dwelling-place.*  
(Mason 43)

The flowering of Buddhism in Japan was the most important cultural force during the Nara period. Under the patronage of the tennō many great Buddhist monasteries were built in and near the capital. The most famous of these temples is Shōmu's Todaiji (Great Eastern Temple), which was dedicated in 752 as the head temple of all provincial Buddhist temples of Japan. It is the world's largest wooden building, even though the present reconstruction of 1692 is only two thirds of the original temple's size. It houses Japan's largest Buddha statue, an imposing bronze figure some sixty-four feet high. The scope of the building project can be grasped by a summary of some of the temple records: "...51,590 persons from all over the realm donated lumber; 370,275 persons sent metal; and 2,179,973 persons gave labor to this giant project of meritorious good work" (Pigott 267).

Todaiji Great Buddha Hall



By 784 Buddhist temples, such as Todaiji, had grown so powerful that the capital was moved from Nara to Nagaoka in order to lessen their influence on government affairs. The capital moved to Kyoto in 794, where it remained until 1868.

Fortunately for archeologists and historians, when the capital departed Nara in 784, the city developed further to the east leaving the imperial palace site undisturbed by urban development. Although the wooden buildings disappeared, much of what remained underground survived under the rice fields that came to cover the site. The wet fields preserved much of the wooden construction material as well as thousands of *mokkan*, wooden tablets on which text was written by a brush in India ink. Since wooden tablets were more accessible and less expensive than other media, *mokkan* were often used for luggage tags. Scholars have been able to use these tablets to document the trade of materials, relations among regions, and economic activity in the capital. Study of *mokkan* at Nara and elsewhere in Japan has become a specialty of historians and archeologists, who meet annually in early December at Nara to share research findings.

The palace site at Nara came under national protection in 1922. In 1953 archaeological excavations

Mokkan



revealed that the remains of the palace had survived in a good state of preservation underground. A major excavation program began in 1955 and continues under the Nara National Cultural Properties Research Institute. The palace site has a museum, walking paths among the ruins, changing exhibits, and many models of interiors and exteriors of 8<sup>th</sup> century buildings populated by doll-sized figures in elaborate period costumes.

We shall take our leave of Nara with another poem from the *Man'yōshū*; the words are those of Ono-no-Oyu, a contemporary observer of the capital who wrote:

*With the beauty of green (tiled roofs)  
and vermilion (pillars),  
The imperial city of Nara is now in its glory,  
Like the brilliance of flowers in full bloom.  
(Ogata)*

This article is the first of three visiting capitals of old Japan. Next stop, Kyoto!

Chandler, T. a. G. F. (1974). *3000 Years of Urban Growth*. New York, Academic Press.

Mason, R. H. P. (1972). *A History of Japan*. Tokyo, Charles E. Tuttle Company.

Ogata, N. (2004). "Nara (Heijō-kyō) — The Capital of Japan in the 8th Century."

[www.hgeo.h.kyoto-u.ac.jp/soramitsu/Nara.html](http://www.hgeo.h.kyoto-u.ac.jp/soramitsu/Nara.html)

Piggott, J. R. (1997). *The Emergence of Japanese Kingship*. Stanford, Stanford University Press.



Sarum Seminar's Linda Jack (center), with study companions at Kokokan History Museum in Ono

## Reading Historical Fiction

by Elaine Kriegh

Recently my daughter Kathie told me she was reading a great book. Since her choice of books is usually something like *The Devil Wears Prada*, I was pleasantly surprised when she told me it was a book about Eleanor of Aquitaine, written by Jean Plaidy. Hurray! She's found historical fiction!

I have always gravitated toward historical fiction because I see it as both instructive and entertaining: learn a little and live (vicariously) a little. The mention of Jean Plaidy brought back thoughts of the many writers of this genre that I have discovered over the years. I especially like family chronicles or multiple volumes on a theme of a certain person or place.

Jean Plaidy is the pen name of Eleanor Hibbert (1906-1993), who also wrote as Victoria Holt (for Gothic romances), and Philippa Carr (for somewhat racy historical romance). Her historical fiction, written under the name of Jean Plaidy, might be better described as "historical romance." She wrote primarily in the 1950's and 1960's, but I discovered her about the time I went to college. The books are rather romantic, involving various royal "romances" ranging from that of William the Conqueror and Matilda of Boulogne to that of Henry VIII and his six wives. As with all historical fiction, my curiosity is in how the authors interpret the facts to create a story. In Ms. Plaidy's case, all the kings are upright and handsome; all the queens are beautiful and virtuous. These books make for a fun read. Some titles are now back in print — that's how Kathie discovered her copy at Borders book store.

Another prolific writer from the past that has recently stirred new interest is Norah Lofts (1904-1983). She has a wider range — not just the royals or near-royals as her subjects. Her forte really is her love of East Anglia, and Suffolk in particular. Almost every one of her many books is set in that area of England. Her fictional town of "Baildon" is almost certainly based on Bury St. Edmunds. Her time frames are broader too. She has developed a style over the years which focus on a particular place, such as a house, town, abbey, or inn, rather than a person or family. Many of her books mention family and place names that the reader would have read about in her other books. My personal favorite is *A Wayside Tavern*, in which the One Bull Inn is really the main character. The reader observes the goings-on at various points in time from the Romans to the present day. Each observation adds another piece to the story. Edward Rutherfurd, author of *Sarum*, *London*, and *The Forest*, has a similar style. Continues on page 8

