

Welsh Rebellion, Owain Glyndwr and Little Stretton?

Little Stretton has 20 listed buildings and several have been assessed to have originated around 1400. This raises the question why should there be a common date for these houses? There could have been a fire but the buildings are too widely spread for this to have caused a whole village renewal. Could it be that Little Stretton was a planned development on a green field site – a sort of medieval Milton Keynes? This is not a likely answer as Church Stretton was only a mile away and was long established in 1400 so why would anyone set up another community nearby when the necessary services were already available. Having eliminated these two possibilities a third can be considered: military action causing total destruction and the need for simultaneous renewal.

England in 1400 was in turmoil. Richard the Second had been deposed in 1399 by his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, who became Henry the Fourth. There were others who had a stronger claim to the throne and Henry was forever thought to be a usurper especially in Wales where Richard had been well thought of. Henry was an accomplished military leader but lacked the flexibility, pragmatism and ability to rise above everyday politics demanded of a monarch. Following his accession he orchestrated a purge of Richard's supporters which caused many to seek revenge and it also left a power vacuum regarding the administration of Wales. This was filled by the Mortimer and Percy families. Their appointment caused resentment in Wales and many problems for Henry shortly afterwards when the Welsh, led by Owen Glyndwr, tried to gain their independence from England. Both families changed their allegiances and supported Glyndwr who was the leading member of the Welsh uchelwyr (aristocracy) and direct descendent of the true princes of Wales.

In addition to the growing problems in Wales Henry was involved in on-going military campaigns in Scotland, Ireland and France and it was in 1400 in Northampton, when he was returning from Scotland, that he heard the Welsh had risen in revolt. He immediately ordered that military preparations should be undertaken in Shrewsbury and later visited the town. The Welsh had taken the opportunity to try and gain their independence while Henry was in a weak position and beset with so many other challenges but the spark which started the fire was a dispute over land between Owen Glyndwr and Lord Grey of Ruthin. Had Henry been less distracted, more flexible and less in hock to Grey, who had helped him seize the throne, he could have intervened and perhaps prevented the rising which was destined to continue for over a decade.

The conflict started when the Welsh undertook a chevauchee into England and burnt Ruthin, Oswestry and Welshpool to the ground. A chevauchee was a standard medieval tactic and involved a scorched earth progress through enemy territory with the intention of stripping goods and animals with which to pay for the campaign and also to spread terror and reduce the determination of the foes. Key targets were monasteries, churches, farms and, if possible, castles.

From Shrewsbury Henry launched three chevauchees through North Wales which achieved very little apart from generating recruits for Glyndwr's army. Henry faced the same problem as the Americans in Vietnam and the Russians in Afghanistan in that when they entered enemy territory the opponents disappeared until the danger had passed or they set ambushes in a landscape which was perfect for guerrilla warfare.

In 1401 and 1402 a series of new laws were passed which exacerbated the situation. Welsh people were banned from owning land in England or towns in Wales and they could hold no public office of significance. English people in Wales could not be tried and found guilty on the word of a Welshman and only a jury of Englishmen could try an English person. The situation for the Welsh was very similar to that of black people in apartheid South Africa and, as so often happens in conflicts, hard strategies which make matters worse are pursued and opportunities to negotiate peace are ignored.

The Register of Robert Mascall (Bishop of Hereford 1404 – 1416) records that in 1406 fifty two churches had been wrecked in the deaneries of Archenfield, Weobley, Leominster, Clun and Pontesbury, including Old and New Radnor, Presteigne, Titley, Lionshall and Kington. In Clun Deanery few churches west of the Long Mynd were intact and the Welsh raiders had reached the suburbs of Hereford and Shrewsbury. Clearly if the churches had been devastated it is reasonable to assume that lay properties had suffered a similar fate and Little Stretton was in the vulnerable area.

In 1407 Shropshire and Hereford MPs were complaining in Parliament about the widespread devastation, the taking of animals and goods and the kidnapping of people for ransom. They also drew attention to the heavy financial costs Hereford and Shrewsbury had to bear regarding defence. In February 1408 the burgesses of Shrewsbury were let off £47 of tax 'in consideration of the great losses which they have sustained by the malice and invasion of the Welsh rebels.' Robert Middleton was excused an annual rent of six marks on his land because of damage by the Welsh in the lordship of Montgomery. ((Hodges 1995)

To return to the starting point and the question of why the oldest buildings in Little Stretton appear to have been started in the first decade of the 1400s one possible answer is that the village was devastated by Welsh raiding parties and required new buildings. The Welsh carried out raids across the west of Shropshire and Herefordshire including Hereford to the south and Shrewsbury to the north of Little Stretton and as the village lies on the main line of communication between the two it is reasonable to assume it is possible the Welsh passed through with serious consequences.

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Acknowledgements

Owain Glyndwr & the War of Independence in the Welsh Borders by Geoffrey Hodges pub Logaston Press 1995

Owain Glyndwr Prince of Wales by R R Davies pub Yllolfa 2009