

MORNING SERIAL

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OFFA'S DYKE

The Scottish independence referendum reminds us about how strong “national” feelings, and the wish to be protected from the interference of outsiders, can be. This is certainly not a modern point of view. It has presumably been a factor in human existence since our very beginnings. It is not a new sentiment within the British Isles either.

So it should not surprise us that Offa's Dyke, pictured here, is an sign and symptom of those sorts of feelings, and of the agendas set by influential political leaders. As an earth-work barricade that was eight feet

high and 65 wide – far more imposing than the picturesque rambler's path depicted in this photograph – Offa's Dyke more or less traced the present-day border between England and Wales.

It is said to have been built on the orders of the impressive king Offa, ruler of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia from AD 757 to 796. Offa was not only the most powerful king of Anglo-Saxon England before Alfred the Great, but was also a determined and regular campaigner against the Welsh.

Wales at that time was far less politically unified than Anglo-Saxon England. Where England had begun

to move slowly towards something more like a single “nation” under one king, the land inhabited by the Welsh was not subject to these forces. Eight-century Wales was made up of many short-lived dominions that rarely outlasted the lifetime of their rulers and which were often at war with each other. Welsh leaders were more often killed – horribly – by their own kind than by outsiders.

Nevertheless, outsiders were always a potent force in shaping Wales. The close presence of England had as important an influence on Wales in Offa's day as it does today, and Offa's intentions – whether to intimidate his Welsh neighbours or

to defend his English subjects against them (or a bit of both) resulted in the construction of a physical barrier marking out a clear frontier between two groups of people.

Almost certainly the dyke contributed to the feelings of the Welsh, politically divided, but united in language and culture, that they belonged together and were quite separate from England. Although it may be a step too far to claim that King Offa defined two “nations” – England and Wales – by ordering the dyke's construction, this great earthwork helped to shape, as one well known historian put it, “the perception of the extent and identity of Wales”.

Medieval

Dr Emma Cavell, University of Wales Trinity St David

STRATA FLORIDA

WHEN William the Conqueror seized England from King Harold in 1066, his followers arrived on the doorstep of Wales. Although Wales was not conquered by the Normans in the way that England had been, continental adventurers seized what land they could from the Welsh and set up their own powerbases there. Wales had become a land of two groups: the native Welsh and the continental invaders.

Through the Normans and those settlers who came after them many new ideas entered Wales. Among other things, they brought in castle-building, heavy cavalry, new languages like French and Flemish, and monasteries quite different from the native Welsh religious houses. In this picture we see the remains of one of those “new” religious houses: the Cistercian Abbey of Strata Florida (Ystrad Flur) in modern-day Cardiganshire.

Originating in Cîteaux near Dijon in the early twelfth century, the Cistercians were the foreign monks who truly captured the Welsh imagination. Valuing solitude, simplicity and manual labour, the Cistercians were perfectly suited to the rugged and lonely landscape of medieval Wales.

Their quest for spiritual perfection also matched similar yearnings in the native religious traditions. Welsh rulers became generous patrons of this new order, and soon a Cistercian monastery had been founded in every Welsh kingdom of any importance.

With those immense but plain stone walls pictured here, Strata Florida was begun by a Norman lord in 1164 but grew to greatness under the patronage of Rhys ap Gruffudd of Deheubarth. It quickly became a centre of scholarship and economic life. Alongside other important Cistercian monasteries in Wales, like Aberconwy, Strata Florida pioneered what we now see as quintessentially Welsh industries: large-scale sheep farming, wool production, and coal-mining.

By the 13th century it had also become a site for lead-mining, a burial place for Welsh princes, an important meeting place for the negotiation of peace and unity, and the production centre for the great Welsh chronicle, Brut y Tywysogyon or “Chronicle of the princes” – still among the most important sources for the history of medieval Wales.

Although Henry VIII of England put a stop to monastic life in the British Isles, the stone ruins pictured here stand as a monument to the influences, domestic and international, that shaped medieval Welsh life and society, and to the central role of Strata Florida and the Cistercian monks in the making of Wales as we know it.



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CONTINUES TOMORROW



THE OLDEST HOUSE
IN WALES

THIS beautiful half-timbered dwelling in Beumaris, Anglesey, is reported to be the oldest house in Wales. It speaks of comfortable urban living – of neighbourhood, a developed infrastructure, and even high-street shopping. Apart from the outmoded construction methods and old-fashioned appearance of the house, which was built around 1400, it seems almost as well suited to life in a modern town as in a medieval one.

But Wales did not always provide an urban life for the majority of the population. Where England experienced a great age of urbanisation in the thirteenth century, and the south-east in particular was wealthy, populous and well kitted out with towns, rugged, thickly wooded and sparsely-populated Wales was much slower to urbanise.

It is true that from the 11th century onward townships were created in Wales and became an important feature of the Welsh economy. Many doubtless began as modest boroughs attached to the castles of Norman warriors or resulted from large-scale movement of peoples encouraged by the foreign lords or the English king. The population of Wales doubled between about 1050 and 1300. By 1300 there were some 300,000 inhabitants in Wales. In England at this time there were more like five million.

Yet this population remained steadfastly rural for much of the medieval period. Fewer than 10 per cent of Welsh men and women ever dwelled in towns or inhabited town-houses. Cardiff was probably the largest population centre at just over 2,000 toward the end of the 13th century. Ordinary people lived in smaller, more isolated communities, distanced from each other by the difficult terrain and living largely from their own resources. The great majority of men and women of medieval Wales lived in crude rectangular houses, often shared with livestock.

Changes were afoot in the Welsh economy, however. The increase in Wales' population in the 12th and 13th centuries meant land was more intensively exploited, forests were cleared, mills were built, villages sprang up, trade expanded, and money circulated more readily. Despite a period of population and economic decline in the fourteenth century, by the end of the middle ages Wales enjoyed extensive trade based on cattle and sheep.

With a reviving economy came better housing – the half-timbered buildings like that pictured, for example. Today some of these houses survive and can be found nestled among more modern buildings in the towns and cities of Wales.



SO, WHO ARE YOU
EMMA CAVELL?

I am a historian of medieval Wales and England who is especially interested in the lives and roles of the aristocratic women who lived in the borderlands between these two 'nations' – the so-called March of Wales. My most recent publication was an article about Marcher noblewomen working as spies in Edward I's wars with Wales! Originally from Australia, I came to Britain to do my PhD and never left. Although I have studied and taught at the universities Oxford, Cambridge, Exeter and Leeds, I currently reside in Cardiff and am a full-time mum to my 10-week-old daughter Edith.



MODERN FAMILY
CATHY OWEN

