

HELÔ PEMBROKESHIRE (SIR BENFRO) 2011

Saturday 7th May

My first visit to Pembrokeshire in Wales had been in 1970, when I stayed at a guest house in Tenby for a week with my parents and an older couple. This second visit (first visit for Alan) promised to be a much livelier affair, with our son Dan, his wife Paula, their 3-year-old daughter Willow and their son Piran, who had celebrated his first birthday only the day before.



Happy birthday to me!

I say celebrated, although it was slightly dampened by the fact that two days before his birthday, Piran had contracted a stomach bug from Nursery. He recovered quickly as young children usually do, but on the morning we travelled to Wales to stay the night with Dan, Paula, Willow and Piran in Pontardawe, Paula succumbed to the virus. Later that evening, Dan also succumbed. Fortunately, they both recovered quickly and we left their house at 14:30 the following afternoon, in reasonably sunny but somewhat windy weather.

It was a pleasant enough journey and it seemed that before we knew it, we were entering Pembrokeshire. Somewhere along the way, the scenery had become very green, with eye-catching amounts of wild flowers, particularly gorse and bluebells. We were renting accommodation for the week in Dinas Cross, located between Fishguard and Newport in the Pembrokeshire National Park. The house was spacious and comfortable and there was an attractively planted garden with a wooden bridge, some streams and a fishpond. Unfortunately, although Willow was safe enough, the pond was a danger zone for Piran the supercrawler.

We had kindly been left some milk and Welsh cakes, so it seemed only polite to enjoy a mug of tea before the inevitable unpacking. The rest of the day was spent exploring the garden, having our evening meal in the conservatory and the necessary washing of dishes and children, but not at the same time (or in the same place, come to that). It was discovered that the television only has a few channels, although this is of minimal importance. The beds are comfortable, though, which is most definitely of maximum importance.

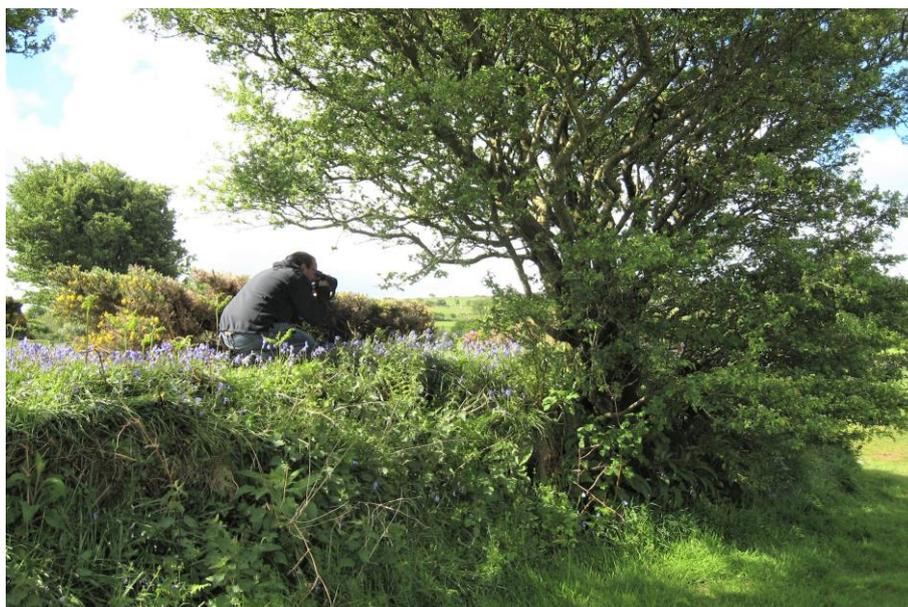


Bridge over the Pembrokeshire stream

Sunday 8th May

Alan and I slept fairly well for a first night in a strange bed and awoke to the sounds of an understandably excited Willow. It had been rainy and windy in the night and was still pretty much the same while we had breakfast, but the sky gradually cleared to intermittent sunshine, although it remained very windy.

Our first visit of the holiday was to Pentre Ifan (homestead of Ivan or Evan's village), known as the best-preserved Neolithic burial chamber, or dolmen, in Wales. In 1884 it was apparently the first monument in Britain to become a Scheduled Ancient Monument. There was roadside parking and easy access along a short path, into an open area where the dolmen presided in all its ruinous glory. After a long session of serious photography on the part of Dan and Alan, patient Willow was allowed to run wild and free, in and out of the three upright stones, whose narrow tops support a capstone of over 16 tons.



A dodgy lurking Dan-shaped photographer



Hail to the ancient Celtic forces of Ifan

After visiting Pentre Ifan, we returned to our cars and sat wondering where we could go next. While Dan and Paula were consulting a map, I looked across the road and spotted a *Cadw Welsh Historic Monuments* sign to another burial chamber, Siambr Gladdu. I excitedly told Alan, who looked surprised and then doubled over laughing. It eventually dawned on me that Siambr Gladdu is Welsh for Burial Chamber. Despite the ignominy, I found it hilarious too.

After this spot of spontaneous hilarity, we followed Dan's car and drove onwards and upwards to a nearby viewing point that looked out over an impressive expanse of coastline stretching from Newport to Fishguard. The promontory named Dinas Island between the two looked particularly picturesque. However, it was so windy up there that there was a narrow escape for Alan when the car boot suddenly came crashing downwards in a gust of wind and almost hit his neck/back as he was leaning over into the boot for his camera.



A view to nearly get concussion for?

Willow and Piran slept on the short journey back to the house, where we drank coffee and perused guide books and information leaflets about the area. After a cheese and pickle sandwich lunch and a sudden shower of rain, we decided to start investigating Fishguard (Abergwaun, meaning mouth of the river Gwaun).

It was only a few miles down the road from Dinas Cross to Upper Fishguard, where it was still very windy. We followed a coast path that was slightly sheltered to Fishguard Fort, situated on a naturally defensive site overlooking Lower Town Harbour. The fort had been built between 1779 and 1781 to deter privateer invaders and was armed with eight nine-pounder guns. The battle of Fishguard in 1797 is claimed to have been the final invasion of Britain, when 1,200 French soldiers landed near Fishguard, only to surrender two days later.



Surrender!

We continued along the coast path, which was strewn liberally with buttercups, bluebells, hawthorn, gorse and campions, before stopping at a headland to look at the view. The wind was so strong that I was slightly afraid a sudden, strong gust would blow Willow over the cliff. She had her hand safely held, though, as we looked across the bay at where the Stena ferry was berthed, preparing for its two-hour voyage to Rosslare in Ireland. It would surely be a bumpy crossing...

We walked further along the coast path, past many more beautiful bluebells. Willow must have been really enjoying the whole experience, because when we decided to turn back because the path had become narrower and stonier, she was most unhappy. We managed to divert her attention as we strolled back, by looking at the ferry as it left the harbour and headed out to sea.

The late afternoon and evening passed as usual with the addition of what was to be a twice daily visit to the fishpond for Paula and Willow to feed the fish. It was too windy to enjoy the garden, so we availed ourselves of the comfort inside.

Monday 9th May

Unfortunately, very little comfort was enjoyed by Alan from about 01:00 this morning, when he succumbed to the stomach bug – fortunately in the luxury of the en suite bedroom. He hardly slept and was still feeling very rough by the morning. I went downstairs at about 07:00 to impart the news to Dan and Paula, who decided to carry on with the day's plan of visiting St Davids Headland.

I spent a very quiet day in the house, reading a lot. I have to confess the day dragged somewhat until the others returned mid-afternoon. I tried to occupy Willow and Piran, but by 17:00 was beginning to feel strangely unwell, so took myself upstairs to join Alan, pretty sure that the axe was about to fall.

It did, quite impressively. All I can say is thank heavens for the en suite.

Tuesday 10th May

A day spent mostly recuperating in the bedroom, in which I read almost a whole Maeve Binchy book. In spite of the rest, I was glad when the day ended.

Wednesday 11th May

Alan and I both slept well last night, probably because we were exhausted after the illness. We therefore presented ourselves downstairs at 07:30 for a toast breakfast and decided we were recovered enough to risk an outing.

As soon as everyone was ready, drove to Strumble Head Lighthouse, located on the rocky St Michael's Island (Ynys Meicel) on the north-west corner of Pen Caer, five miles west of Fishguard. One of the best aspects of this holiday was that nowhere was very far away. Standing at 55 feet/16.8 metres high, the attractive white lighthouse was constructed in 1908 and was fully automated in 1980.



The attractive lighthouse

As we drove along, I was entranced by the flora, which was truly breathtaking, with swathes of bright yellow gorse, bluebells and some wild cowslips. I felt really sorry for Alan who was driving and unable to see it all properly, because the hedges were amazing, particularly a whole hedge of pink sea thrift:



A whole hedge of sea thrift

The final part of the road was more of a single-track lane with passing places, although both Dan and Alan are well accustomed to such driving in Cornwall and Devon. There was a short, fairly steep walk from the car down to the cliff path below, which we walked along to find the best view for taking photos.

Willow was obviously enjoying herself exploring the surroundings, including an observatory often used by naturalists looking out for seabirds and cetaceans, such as seals. Piran was understandably less interested, but he was amenable and had a little walk along one of the many trails in the area that must be very popular with walkers, because of the wonderful scenery and views.

It was still extremely windy and after we had finished taking photos and being blown around by the wind, our next stop was at Garn Fawr. This is the site of an Iron Age hill fort on a ridge of the highest ground within the Pen Caer peninsula. There was plenty of space in the allotted car park, which opened to a short walk along a pathway within some moorland that was interspersed with pasture fields, one in which a few black cows grazed nonchalantly.

Garn Fawr hill fort itself was at the top of a weathered rocky outcrop. Smaller hill forts are strung out along the ridge, which seems to have been of strategic prehistoric importance. It appears that while the Bronze Age is represented by round barrows and standing stones here, Iron Age remnants are dominant.

I found my energy levels were waning at this point, so instead of climbing to the top of the hill fort with the others, I perched on a comfortable grass-covered rock in the lee of the wind and gazed at the inspiring view stretching below.

Beyond a patchwork of fields, Strumble Head Lighthouse sat on top of its very own island (reached only by a suspension bridge), while the Pembrokeshire coastline swept around to the right as far as St Davids Head. It was pleasantly warm in the sun amid the wild flowers and singing birds and I felt a sense of perfect peace there – even when a shiny black beetle attached itself to the top of my index finger and was strangely reluctant to disengage itself.



Peace on a rock at Garn Fawr

It was time to return to the house for lunch, which was a banana and a biscuit for still slightly delicate Alan and me. We decided on an afternoon trip to see an Ogham stone at St Brynach's church in Nevern. Ogham is an ancient form of writing made by linear cuts and there are at least 35 stones with such writing in Wales, dating to around the 5th century AD. I've always been fascinated with Ogham writing, which originated from Ireland in around the 4th century AD and travelled to Wales along with many Irish settlers in the post-Roman era.

As we arrived in Nevern outside the Norman church, we saw a freestanding wall with steps leading up from both sides to a flat top, but the back of it went straight down. It was a mounting block, one of only two left in Pembrokeshire, built for purposes of mounting and dismounting for those who used to travel to church on horseback or in carriages. Willow loved running up and down the steps – it was a miracle this photo was taken, as she hardly stayed still at all!



So where's my horse and carriage?

On entering the churchyard, I immediately noticed one of the famous bleeding yews that drip a dark red resin from old wounds on their trunks. It did look a bit red and sore – poor yew. A few steps closer to the entrance of the church was the Ogham stone itself, named the Vitalianus stone, dating from around 500 AD. Inscribed in Latin is 'VITALIANI EMERTO' and in Ogham 'vitaliani'. There were supposed to be other Ogham stones inside the church, but we failed to find them. I've since discovered they are embedded in the window sills.

A little further on and impossible to miss was the intricately carved 10th-century Celtic cross, 13 feet/4 metres high, cut from local hard dolerite stone:



Ogham to the left and Celtic to the right

We wandered around the churchyard, which surprisingly proved very interesting with a few lovely trees and interesting gravestones. One gravestone in particular caught my eye. It had a sad little rhyme to Anna Letitia and George, two children of the Revd David Griffiths, who had died in their infancy in 1794: *They tasted of life's bitter cup. Refused to drink the potion up. But turned their little heads aside. Disgusted with the taste and died.* I'm sure the churchyard would have revealed plenty more of interest, but it was time to move on.

We headed to another church, or rather the remains of one, at Cwm-yr-Eglwys, which is a hamlet in a small cove at the north side of the Dinas Head peninsula. In the famous great storm of 25th and 26th October 1859, the 12th-century church of St Brynach had almost been destroyed, apart from its belfry, west wall and part of its graveyard. These remains still stand proudly telling their story.

The storm had been the most severe one to hit the British Isles in the whole of the 19th century, with a death toll of over 800. A total of 133 ships sank and another 90 were badly damaged. On the plus side, however, this gave rise to the first gale warning service in 1860 in order to prevent further such tragedy.

As we approached Cwm-yr-Eglwys, we saw parking would be £2. Dan and Paula decided to take Willow and Piran to a nearby beach instead, but Alan and I wanted to investigate the church. In the car park, there was a notice in a small shed, asking us politely to put £2 through a hole in the door (which we did). The remains of the church were starkly visible as we walked towards the sea. It was quite cold and windy, which was a little amusing since the local microclimate is meant to be a few degrees hotter and dryer than other parts of this coast.



Like a film set facade, there's nothing behind

It was too cold to enjoy the small cove or walk along the coast path, so we decided to drive on to nearby Newport in search of another burial chamber.



Alan and the magic mushroom of Carreg Coetan

We found it without much trouble, although it meant parking the car on the roadside and walking a little way through some private housing. Our first impression of Carreg Coetan was that it was small, but it was also very pleasing, despite being almost in the back of somebody's garden. It was cloudy when we arrived, but patches of sun meant we stayed there for some time waiting for the sun to appear for photographic purposes, as you/we do.

We decided to explore Fishguard further, since all these places were fairly close together, it was still only mid-afternoon, we wanted to make the most of the day and we were feeling well enough. On arrival, we located the car park and paid 30p for two hours, which seemed a bargain after Cwm-yr-Eglwys.

After a brief walk around the shops, Alan saw a sign that said Gorsedd, so with distant memories of blue bards in a 1977 Cornish Gorsedd ceremony just down the road from our house, we followed the sign. The Gorsedd circle was right next to a street of houses with an overhead power cable, but it was set upon a large grassy area that overlooked a lovely coastal view, both out into the bay and down on Fishguard Lower Town nestling below. The circle had been built in 1936 for the Eisteddfod, with stones contributed from various parishes:



The magic circle (minus power cable to the left)

It was still quite cold and windy and we had eventually tired ourselves out, so we headed back to the house for some warmth, some food and a lazy evening. Dan decided to go out for a sunset photo shoot, as the cloud cover promised to be interesting – all in a day of the life of a professional photographer.

Thursday 12th May

We slept quite well and the weather was looking promising, so when we were ready, we threw together a packed lunch and headed for St Dogmael's Abbey, near Cardigan. There was plenty of blue sky and ever-changing puffy white clouds, although the wind was still very much in evidence. We parked easily enough in the small car park and entered through the Heritage Centre fully expecting to pay admission, but the abbey was free and the remains themselves looked to be quite extensive. Wales is usually very reasonable for entrance fees.

We spent a happy half hour and more wandering around in our own time, with hardly any other visitors. St Dogmael was an early Christian saint, who had founded a local monastic church. The present remains, however, are from a priory that was founded in the early 12th century by an Anglo-Norman lord, who brought over a small community of monks to Wales from the Order of Tiron in northern France. In 1120, there were about 25 monks from the mother house and the priory was allowed to be raised in status to an abbey. It remained so until 1536 and the Dissolution of the Monasteries, thanks to King Henry VIII.



A happy ruinous wanderer or two

Willow seemed to enjoy walking, climbing and running around in freedom, as it was all relatively safe. I learned from strategically placed information boards that the ruins spanned four centuries. Near the end of our explorations, I noticed that some of the original tiled floor could be seen, which brought it all a bit more to life for me, imagining monk-like feet shuffling along on them in ancient times.



Willow shows her dad around the old abbey

After we'd had our fill of remains, we went back to the Heritage Centre for a mid-morning snack at the café. There was plenty of information to be read and a couple of colourful activity desks for young children, so Willow and Piran were kept amused. I've since found out there are models and displays, as well as a collection of early inscribed stones that actually predate the abbey. On a future visit, we shall know better! However, it was an enjoyable visit as it was.



Piran teaches Grandad how to play

Our next stop was at Castell Henllys (castle of the old court) between Newport and Cardigan, a reconstructed Iron Age hill fort on the site of an original hill fort.



A des res at the hill fort

The site dates back 2,400 years, with ongoing excavation for 20+ years and the reconstruction is therefore based on archaeological evidence. Historians suggest the settlement probably housed several families, with a population of over 100. Four roundhouses and a granary have been reconstructed and looked great.



A massive thatched mushroom

We've visited a few reconstructed sites before and this one was by far the best for its intricate detail inside the houses, which was outstanding. It was also very much a hands-on affair, as when we arrived, groups of schoolchildren were being shown how to make daub (as in wattle and daub) and were having a great deal of fun being allowed to have a go at mixing the daub in a purpose-built pit.



Decorating the house Celtic style?

It was a little difficult at times to take photos as the schoolchildren raced around dressed up in Celtic garb, but they were very well supervised and we simply waited around for a while until the view was clear. Besides, it was encroaching upon lunchtime and they soon all gathered around in a circle out of the way to eat their packed lunches. Sorted. There were a few other 'normal' visitors there, but they didn't really cause a photographic problem.

We soon took ourselves and our lunch to the picnic area, which was in the herb garden – bliss! We were the only ones there, so further bliss! I was quite sorry when it was time to go, but even walking away from the hill fort was interesting, coming across what appeared to be an outdoor shrine to a Celtic god or two.

After finally leaving Castell Henllys, we drove along roads with the most fantastic hedges I've ever seen, because as well as the usual delightful flowers, swathes of dripping laburnum graced the scene for quite a distance. Then there were lots of luscious green ferns that fooled me into thinking I was somewhere slightly tropical. It was like driving through an early summer wonderland.

Our next stop was by some moorland on which stood the Gors Fawr stone circle (one of the best stone circles to be seen in Wales) within view of the Preseli Mountains that are well-renowned for being the source of bluestone in the inner circle at Stonehenge. It was a short walk from the road, across some slightly soggy moorland and it was cold and windy. I was a little underwhelmed by the stone circle itself, as the 16 stones were small compared to some of the Cornish circles I know and love (none of the Gors Fawr stones were over a metre tall).



Some of the Gors Fawr stones

Having said that, it was a delightful stone circle and I did appreciate it. It always seems amazing to come across evidence of Neolithic or Bronze Age activity, circa 2300-1200 BC. Also, I've since found out there are two outlying stones there of nearly 6.6 feet/2 metres tall towards the north-east, so good on you, Gors Fawr.

Our final destination was to view an Ogham stone at Glandwr church, situated at the foothills of the Preseli Mountains. On approaching the 19th-century Baptist church, the stone was easily visible in the churchyard, although a little difficult to photograph, as it was standing very close to a similarly coloured wall. I wish I knew what the writing actually said, but just the fact that it was Ogham writing was enough to blow me away. Perhaps tomorrow it will be less windy?



Who carved you and what do you say?

It was quite a sunny (if not a little windy) evening, passed in the usual pursuits. Dan departed for a sunset once again, to a likely-looking place above us on the craggy moorland that's not very far at all from the house.

Friday 13th May

It was sunny when we woke, but unfortunately the weather forecast was for some rain mid-morning, so we made a reasonably quick get-away, complete with another hastily packed lunch. Dan led us to his sunset site of yesterday evening, as it gave a really good view. It was rather windy again and it did indeed begin to be quite overcast as we walked from the edge of the moorland up to a rocky outcrop. It's always good for the soul to be out, though, not to mention the body. Besides, we're used to the vagaries of moorland weather.

As we approached the rocky outcrop, Dan and Alan had already sped ahead to a further one (the one with the best view, I suspect). However, the weather was looking decidedly dodgier by the minute and Paula decided it was best to stay put, sheltering Piran underneath a large overhanging rock. Willow was all for joining Dad and Grandad, but was persuaded to stay behind with us and content herself with exploring all around the rocks where we were. Then it started to really rain, so we all walked as quickly as possible back to the car – with the exception of Willow, who seems not to mind the wet weather at all.



Dressed for the weather in her dad's hat

The rain was only a passing shower and the sun emerged as we drove to St Davids. We were able to park reasonably close to the cathedral (which I had visited on my first visit to Pembrokeshire), although our current destination was the Bishop's Palace, next to the cathedral that was today sporting a fine overcoat of scaffolding. As we walked along from the car park, the weather was magnanimously dry and there was an obligingly fine view of the palace ruins:



The Bishop's Palace

St Davids is the smallest city in Britain, but was the largest and most important diocese in Wales when Bishop Henry de Gower (bishop from 1328-1347) had his palace built – partly for his own private use and partly for ceremonial occasions.

It was clear to see the palace had been built to impress and must have been a status symbol in its time. However, little had been done to upkeep or improve the building after Bishop Henry de Gower's death in 1347 and by the mid-16th century, the chief episcopal residence had moved to Carmarthen. In 1678, St Davids was ransacked by Parliamentarians and the palace was beyond repair.



Modern repairs

We enjoyed strolling around with not many other visitors there. As ruins go, it was still quite an attractive building with arcaded parapets and plenty of detail, including carved stone gargoyles and decorative arches, windows and doorways. The whole building was well-endowed with informative notices and a climb up to the belfry gave a splendid view of the palace ruins and the nearby cathedral.



The nearby cathedral can be seen from the belfry

It was during one of their chats about the architecture of the palace that Alan remarked innocently to Paula, "You'd think they'd have had more trouble with leaks." It was an answer waiting to happen – and it did, with Paula's immediate reply, "Well, this *is* Wales." We returned to the car park at around midday and ate our packed lunch in the cars, just as it started to rain again. It was fairly heavy rain too, so it was a case of really good timing.

Our next stop was near the sea at St Davids Head, along the rocky coastline above St Non's Bay. The others had visited here on Monday while Alan and I had been unwell (and therefore in need of a well visit?) Willow seemed perfectly happy to be visiting the well again, maybe because on the previous visit she had enjoyed throwing a few coins into the well - some old traditions seem inborn?



Willow follows ancient tradition

St Non's Holy Well was well cared for, clearly built up from its early days (as compared to a number of holy wells in Devon and Cornwall). A stone vault was added in the 18th century and it was restored in 1951 by the Catholic church, who have a retreat on the cliff top, along with a modern chapel. It's interesting that the Catholic church have taken an overtly pagan site for their own use.

The rather intriguingly named St Non (or St Nonna) was born in around 475 AD and is said to have given birth to St David. The well is in a pleasant setting and is still visited for its healing properties, particularly on St Non's Day, 2nd March.

Nearby in a field that contained some inquisitive but gentle brown and white cows, St Non's Chapel (or the Chapel of Blessed Non) stood ruinously secure in its gated wooden enclosure. The earliest reference to a chapel on this site is apparently in 1335, although stone coffins revealed by excavation may indicate slab-lined graves of the early Christian period. Another interesting feature of the chapel is that its alignment is north-south, instead of the usual east-west.



St Non's Chapel

However, what drew the most interest in the chapel itself was a stone propped up in the corner. Referred to as St Non's Cross, it is intriguingly inscribed with a Latin cross and thought to date as far back as around the 8th century:



St Non's Cross

After bidding farewell to the cows (I won't say anything about Dan getting close up and personal to take a photo of one) we decided to find one more place to visit, as it was still early afternoon. We ended up at Solva on the north side of St Bride's Bay and situated along a deep ravine carved out by melting glacial water, at the mouth of the River Solva. The car park for a small fee of £1 was at Lower Solva, which was basically a long street that ended at a small harbour.

Solva had been the main trading centre of St Bride's Bay in the Middle Ages, with one of the most sheltered anchorages between Fishguard and Milford Haven. In the 19th century it had around 30 registered trading ships, but today it simply offered us a short coastal walk to view some well-preserved lime kilns, interesting flora, an ice cream and continuous buffeting from a persistent wind.

I've since learned that the musician David Gray spent a lot of his childhood in Solva, which might go some way to explain his lyrics (I actually like his music, including his lyrics!) I have to say there didn't really seem a great deal going on in Solva, but I can understand that in high summer it's a quaint, picturesque place in which to while away time walking along the coast path or exploring the local pubs, eating places and small craft shops. Also, if messing around in boats is your pleasure, the local harbour looks to be ideal.



Looking into Lower Solva from a lime kiln

However, being boatless and cold, we returned to Castle Dinas and warmed up with some hot tea. The rest of the day was spent amusing Willow and Piran. I managed to impress Willow with my drawing skills, but she's already beginning to look askance at my more adventurous attempts. In the meantime, Dan was enjoying a bit of rough and tumble with his son, when Piran accidentally stuck his finger up his father's nose and made it bleed. The joys of parenthood...

After a laid-back evening (or more of a sat-back one, to be pedantic) the holiday gradually drew to a close. In view of the days that Alan and I had missed, a cunning plan was hatched by Dan to visit a place or two on the journey back to Pontardawe the following day. Alan and I weren't going to object!

Saturday 14th May

We had to leave the house by 10:00 and it goes without saying that the leave-taking was frenetic (plus the fact that nobody seems to like packing), but we actually left at 09:45. It was sunny and it made perfect sense to make the most of the day, so after stopping at Fishguard Co-op to buy sandwiches, we drove for the last time along roads with such beautiful hedges that I never wanted to blink, until we arrived at Wiston Castle in Wiston village near Haverfordwest.

There was a short walk from where we parked the cars to one of the best-preserved motte and bailey castles in Wales. It was a very aesthetically pleasing ruin, complete with 49 granite steps (I counted them) leading up to the castle:



Dan ascends the 49 steps

The castle is thought to have been built in the 12th century on the site of an Iron Age settlement, by a Flemish settler with the name of Wizo (in Latin) or Gwys (in Welsh). Wizo died in 1130, although the castle is mentioned in documents of 1147, when it was taken by the Welsh. After being captured and recaptured a few times, it was abandoned by 1220. There was a good view from the top and we were the only visitors on a very fine day – even the wind had dropped.

Having seen all there was to see, we descended the 49 steps and drove on to Llawhaden Castle (Castell Llanhuadain) three miles away in the quiet village of Llawhaden. A short walk from the car revealed a surprisingly impressive ruin.



A deep well supplied the fortified palace

Llawhaden Castle was the concern of the bishops of St Davids and the first castle on the site had been built on orders from Bishop Bernard in 1115. Only the moat and earth bank remain from this era, while the majority of the ruins date from the fortified palace built by Bishop Adam de Houghton between 1362-1389.



Plundered for its stone

The Dissolution of the Monasteries, between 1536-1541, led to the final demise of Llawhaden Castle, which was completely abandoned. It gradually fell into total disrepair and suffered the common fate of being plundered for building stone.

This castle seemed colder in more ways than one, as the wind had sprung up again. Willow enjoyed roaming around, with a sudden interest in the garderobes. After a satisfying exploration, we returned at midday to a picnic bench by our cars. It was so windy that we had to anchor down sandwich packets, etc, but a windy picnic seemed a strangely fitting end to a windy week in Pembrokeshire.

I would love to return to this gem of a Welsh county and explore more of what we were only able to enjoy a tantalising taster. Early May would be ideal again, when the hedges are to die for – and when it's hopefully a lot less windy!

