

# **The ‘Quick’ Death of Prince Llywelyn of Wales 10 December 1282**

Wikipedia versus the Sources

**Ceidio**

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*Cover Photograph: The killing of Prince Llywelyn from the Rochester chronicle, BL. Cotton Nero Ms. D II, fo.182, by Jo Barwell.*

## **Preface**

This booklet has been produced to simply expound the fate of Prince Llywelyn ap Gruffydd of Wales. Unfortunately it does not contain any translations of original documents, but it does sum up in the **Conclusion** chapter what happened that winter night so many years ago - or at least what we really know of it now.

This booklet is intended to be didactic, just as were the medieval chronicles which recorded 'history' and from which we draw upon for evidence of so much of our 'known' past. It's function is intended to be the introduction of the reader to real historical research and our British history, rather than perpetuating what are some pretty illogical myths and storytelling. On another level it also introduces the main and highly detailed book on this affair. The full book does contain a multitude of original translations of many previously translated and untranslated documents. These help build up to the conclusion as printed in this booklet.

It is hoped that the information contained in both book and booklet will be the foyer of the reader's deeper introduction to sourced history. This, or real history as it might be known, consists of original documentation and it's placing in a valid chronology. Fantasy 'history by comparison consists of unsubstantiated and usually erroneous Wikipedia style soundbytes and endless, but truly meaningless discussions over the hyperbole of modern commentators. I know which version I far prefer, uncertain substance of demonstrably illogical myth, which may be entertaining, but is neither true, nor honest.

The basis of what follows in this booklet is taken directly from the main book, *The Killing of Prince Llywelyn of Wales, 10 December 1282* [Ceidio, 2014].

## **Introduction**

It is difficult to begin a book, let alone a booklet, which hopes to cover a single moment in history when a prince and his principality were effectively extinguished. It is therefore even more difficult to produce a brief summary of such a work for public consumption. How much real evidence should it have within; or, as is done here, should just the conclusion and a brief account of its historical research style be included?

Hence what follows is primarily the beginning and the end of the main book placed together and modified to tell the sad tale of Llywelyn's last day.

It may sound a strange thing to say, but we must also examine what we are discussing. Even defining the moment of a killing in history is next to impossible. Did the principality of Wales cease to exist with Llywelyn's life in the falling of a sword blade in December 1282, or did it continue until King Edward I officially annexed Gwynedd some fifteen months later by his well known statute of Rhuddlan? Posing such a question may seem semantic, but isn't history made up of such questions? Did Llywelyn die in battle or was he murdered? Both assertions are often put forward, but what is the evidence behind them and is it valid? Indeed, with all the controversy surrounding the matter what is real evidence and what is simply made up 'fact' to support various historical arguments? Was Llywelyn's brother Dafydd his natural successor as prince of Wales or was he a usurper? History is made up of such questions and many people have supplied answers, but are they valid and how can we tell?

In all cases the answers to these questions tend to depend on which side of the fence you sit upon with your own personal appreciation of history. History may be an art and not a science, but that does not mean that we do not need to treat

our evidence scientifically. If a piece of evidence does not fit into our personal opinion it is an historically criminal act to ignore it, or even worse to pretend that it does not exist. By all means bring the fact up and state why you think it to be worthless, but do not consign it to the oblivion you may think it richly deserves. Because you do not understand that fact, or its brutality offends you, it does not mean that it is not an important piece in the jigsaw. A contemporary medieval statement that is wrong - or at least appears to be wrong as far as it can be judged now, centuries after the event it refers to - can throw extra light on medieval events and our understanding of them. All recorded events, even those that may be wrong, should be considered by the modern historian to come to a balanced perspective. Indeed in compiling a narrative it is always advisable to place unsettling facts in your footnotes as what is meaningless or wrong to you may, when added to further information, suddenly make matters much clearer. It should be the job of historians to make history understandable - it is not their job to create history according to their own biases.

What then can we say about the death of Llywelyn in an Introduction to a brief booklet? This death was a crucial waystone in the history of both England and Wales. For England it symbolised the closing of a troublesome back door of internal distractions when Anglo-Norman rulers preferred to face south into a militarily powerful Europe. In Wales it ended the last embers of a kingship that had been dying for centuries and politically completed the revolution of English Common Law which had been penetrating into the Welsh cantrefws for generations. These broad historical themes are much too abstract and complex to examine in a book about a single death, but they shape the story of what happened.

It is today no more possible to properly examine a murder case without looking at the suspects and their environment, as it is impossible to sensibly tell this story without doing the same. What then is necessary to make sense of the conflicting modern claims about the prince's death? We will need to examine what was occurring in Wales and what were the objectives of Prince Llywelyn, his adherents and his enemies. This will be done in the opening chapters of the main book where the value of the evidence that has survived about this killing is examined and evaluated. Here, this short booklet only allows the mention of these facts and a brief essay into what is and what is not primary evidence, before the conclusion is printed.

As a final point to the Introduction, it should be remembered that today most murderers are intimates of the victim<sup>\*1</sup>. It would seem probable that such a truism was representative eight hundred and indeed even eight thousand years ago. Therefore any search for the killer or killers of Prince Llywelyn must look closely at his relatives, friends and intimates, as far as we can now judge them. Therefore, as ever, our knowledge of the present is taken as a measure of the past. To achieve the aim of discovering why and how Llywelyn was killed it is therefore necessary to spend much time in the main book examining the history of Gwynedd immediately prior to Llywelyn's death as well as the affairs of many of his contemporaries and indeed of the men who recorded the events that led to the killing of Prince Llywelyn of Wales.

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<sup>\*1</sup> Fox, J & Zawitz, M., *Homicide Trends in the United States* [2006].

## The Primary Evidence

Reports by eyewitnesses as to what happened on that December night are few and far between. Nonetheless, eyewitnesses there were and some evidence of what they saw has come down to us. Unfortunately this testimony is not straightforward and to properly understand it, it will be necessary in the main book to examine those who were directly involved in Llywelyn's killing and to explore what they wrote of their experiences and what has survived in written form of their impressions of that fateful evening.

It would appear that Llywelyn only took eighteen men with him to meet his destiny and that all of these men, even his priest, were killed that night<sup>\*2</sup>. Therefore, of his final moments we have only the testimony of his killers and rather surprisingly they are silent on the events. However this is not necessarily unnatural or unusual. Roger Mortimer (d.1282) had killed Earl Simon Montfort at the battle of Evesham in 1265<sup>\*3</sup>, and as everyone apparently knew this, it was not necessary to record the incident in any extant chronicle or even in the Mortimer histories kept by or for his later family<sup>\*4</sup>. Similarly the killing of Prince Cadwallon ap Madog by an earlier Roger Mortimer (d.1214) in 1179 was not recorded in Mortimer texts, although several contemporary chronicles recorded the act. Indeed, even a long Welsh elegy on Cadwallon's death fails to mention any

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<sup>\*2</sup> Gruffydd ap Yr Ynad Coch's elegy on Llywelyn ap Gruffydd mentions the killing of the eighteen, while no account mentions any survivors amongst Llywelyn's confidants. However Gruffydd's poem is difficult and its meaning obscure. Extracts from various translations of this are printed in the full book.

<sup>\*3</sup> De Laborderie, O., Maddicott, JR., Carpenter, DA., 'The Last Hours of Simon de Montfort: A New Account', *English Historical Review*, [April, 2000]

<sup>\*4</sup> For the various Mortimer 'chronicles' and their origins see the Introduction to *The Wigmore Chronicle, 1066 to 1377: A Translation of John Rylands Manuscript 215 and Trinity College, Dublin, MS.488, ff. 295-9*, ed & trans., Remfry, P.M. [Ceidio, 2013]. An Internet article of this is available at [https://www.academia.edu/5135070/Wigmore\\_Chronicle](https://www.academia.edu/5135070/Wigmore_Chronicle)

Mortimer involvement in the killing<sup>\*5</sup>. Conversely the family of Fulk Fitz Warin of Whittington thought it fitting to expound on and boast about their illegal killing of a Welsh ruler in 1200 as well as the disfiguring of a neighbouring Norman lord<sup>\*6</sup>. Perhaps the difference was that the Mortimers were an established and rich baronial family, while the Fitz Warins were relatively poor and ‘on the make’. Unfortunately the Fitz Warin romance ends in the early thirteenth century and there are no surviving accounts of any family history carrying on into the fourteenth century. Similarly, although there are many royal documents concerning the Lestrangle family, there are no traces of any family history or genealogy if one ever existed.

Considering the surviving accounts for the Mortimer and Fitz Warin families it is possible that there were written accounts of the killing of Llywelyn made for members of the aristocracy who were present at his death. Of the known baronial families present, Mortimer, Giffard, Lestrangle, Corbet, Fitz Peter, Basset, Astley as well as the two grandchildren of Gwenwynwyn of Powys, only the Mortimers have family histories that survive<sup>\*7</sup>. The powerful baronies of Mortimer of

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<sup>\*5</sup> Remfry, P.M., *Medieval Battles: Wales* [forthcoming], volume 2.

<sup>\*6</sup> See Remfry, P.M., *Whittington Castle and the families of...* [Malvern, 2007], 82, for comments on the death of Meurig Powys.

<sup>\*7</sup> For these families see the following: Mortimer, Remfry, P.M., *Wigmore Castle, 1066 to 1181*; Giffard, Remfry, P.M., *Castell Carreg Cennen and the families of...* [Malvern, 2010]; Lestrangle, Le Strange, Hamon, *Le Strange Records. A Chronicle of the Early Le Stranges of Norfolk and the March of Wales with the lines of Knockin and Blackmere continued to their Extinction A.D. 1100 to 1310* [London 1916]; Corbet, Corbet, A.E., *The Family of Corbet: its Life and Times* [2 vols., London, 1915-18]; Fitz Peter, Remfry, P.M., *Castell Bwlch y Dinas and the families of...* [Malvern, 2007]; see the later chapter in this book on Gruffydd ap Gwenwynwyn of Powys and his children. For a brief description of the Mortimer texts see *The Wigmore Chronicle, 1066 to 1377: A Translation of John Rylands Manuscript 215 and Trinity College, Dublin, MS.488, ff. 295-9*, ed & trans, Remfry, P.M. [Ceidio, 2013].



Chirk<sup>\*8</sup>, Giffard and Corbet all effectively died out in the early fourteenth century as too did the main line of descent from Gruffydd ap Gwenwynwyn. The baronies of Basset of Drayton and Basset of Sapecote died out in the late fourteenth century, while the descendants of Reginald Fitz Peter lost both power and status as the fourteenth century progressed. With the demise of the main lines of these families it is likely that any family 'histories' became redundant and so were unlikely to survive.

The lack of family histories means that first hand accounts concerning the death of Llywelyn consist of just three types of document. The first two are original letters written by participants in the events and royal and other letters copied by royal or episcopal chanceries. Many such documents exist and they will be examined in the main book. The final group of sources are the chronicle references to the killing. These were made by ecclesiastics who were often locked away from society in religious cloisters. Of necessity these consist of hearsay, but some of the accounts contained in them might have come from participants in the events they describe. Consequently we have to rely on the statements that appear in these chronicles backed with such phrases as, 'this is what I have heard', or 'it is commonly believed'. Such sources of uncertain date and provenance are obviously to be treated carefully and will be examined in some detail under their own chapters in the full book.

In many ways it is a pity, though hardly surprising, that it is the chroniclers' conflated 'histories' that have captured the public imagination, rather than the dryer facts and figures

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<sup>\*8</sup> Although the main line of Mortimer of Chirk continued until 1504 they were politically broken and insignificant from 1322.

hidden away in copies of old royal and episcopal ledgers. Thus when asked about the death of Prince Llywelyn most people will have heard versions of the fanciful and hopelessly inaccurate tales of the Anglo-Scottish monk Walter Guisborough, otherwise known as Walter Hemingburgh. He literally made up his account twenty or thirty years after 1282, but few will have read the first hand account of Roger Lestrange who actually fought against Llywelyn's army on 11 December 1282. It is further a fact that these fanciful and often downright illogical accounts have been elevated to the status of recorded fact in some quarters, especially in that den of dubious misrepresentation, Wikipedia. The falsifications and inventions of Wikipedia editors ensure that this 'source' must be examined briefly if only to remove it from further serious consideration. This is especially necessary as various unreferenced creations that only seem to appear in this 'source' have recently been used to help obtain a university degree<sup>\*9</sup>! Unfortunately the many versions of Llywelyn's death as given both on the Internet and in books of 'serious' history, mean that Wikipedia can be taken as a pinnacle of misinformation on most certainly this and indeed probably on any other subject. It is sad for history that due to the ubiquitous nature of this deeply flawed 'resource' Wikipedia is perhaps the best known version of British history and surely and sadly our worldwide governments have taken to heart the saying 'He who controls the past controls the future'<sup>\*10</sup>.

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<sup>\*9</sup> Moore, J.E., *Cultural Rebellions: Welsh Literary Outpouring after the Thirteenth-Century Edwardian Conquest* [Duke University, 2006-7, Senior History Honors Thesis].

<sup>\*10</sup> Wikipedia 'editors' can often be found to be government employees., apparently working to order, <http://www.hangthebankers.com/us-govt-caught-editing-wikipedia-profiles-to-spread-propaganda/>  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/government-wikipedia-edit-scandal-grows-beyond-hills-borough-as-more-changes-emerge-9291988.html>

(continued...)

Considering this, it is worthwhile taking a short look at what Wikipedia actually says concerning Llywelyn's death and then making a few broad statements which will be filled out in much more detail as fact and evidence are presented before the reader in the main book. As Wikipedia is an often changing 'resource' it is necessary to print what it currently states in February 2014:

Llywelyn now left Dafydd to lead the defence of Gwynedd and took a force south, trying to rally support in mid and south Wales and open up an important second front. On 11 December at the Battle of Orewin Bridge at Builth Wells, he was killed while separated from his army. The exact circumstances are unclear and there are two conflicting accounts of his death. Both accounts agree that Llywelyn was tricked into leaving the bulk of his army and was then attacked and killed. The first account says that Llywelyn and his chief minister approached the forces of Edmund Mortimer and Hugh Le Strange after crossing a bridge. They then heard the sound of battle as the main body of his army was met in battle by the forces of Roger Despenser and Gruffudd ap Gwenwynwyn. Llywelyn turned to rejoin his forces and was pursued by a lone lancer who struck him down. It was not until some time later that an English knight recognised the body as that of the prince. This version of events was written in the north of England some fifty years later and has suspicious similarities with details about the Battle of Stirling

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<sup>\*10</sup> (...continued)

<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/aug/07/wikipedia-edits-government-high-profile-killings>

Bridge in Scotland. An alternative version of events written in the east of England by monks in contact with Llywelyn's exiled daughter, Gwenllian ferch Llywelyn, and niece, Gwladys ferch Dafydd, states that Llywelyn, at the front of his army, approached the combined forces of Edmund and Roger Mortimer, Hugo Le Strange and Gruffudd ap Gwenwynwyn on the promise that he would receive their homage. This was a deception. His army was immediately engaged in fierce battle during which a significant section of it was routed, causing Llywelyn and his eighteen retainers to become separated. At around dusk, Llywelyn and a small group of his retainers (which included clergy), were ambushed and chased into a wood at Aberedw. Llywelyn was surrounded and struck down. As he lay dying, he asked for a priest and gave away his identity. He was then killed and his head hewn from his body. His person was searched and various items recovered, including a list of "conspirators", (which may well have been faked), and his privy seal.

The printing of such a fanciful account here may be giving Wikipedia further publicity, but it is necessary to do this and then expound upon the unbelievable and unsubstantiated nature of the account. Thus by shining light on the patent inaccuracies it contains it allows the 'source' to be examined and discarded as most wanting.

The Wikipedia editors' accepting of the battle of Orwin Bridge as an historical fact (see reference to the 'battle' on Wikipedia) and its placing at Builth Wells is open to contradiction from the evidence, but this is not half as bad an error as the statement that there are two conflicting accounts of

Llywelyn's death. The evidence as displayed in the main book, and freely available in many scholarly accounts, shows there are multiple accounts of Llywelyn's fate, though some have far more credibility than others. It is therefore ludicrous to state that both accounts agree that Llywelyn was tricked into leaving the bulk of his army. Original sources show that Llywelyn left his army, but for reason or reasons that can now only be guessed at. Such misleading generalisations and even downright inventions are unfortunately commonplace on Wikipedia. Further inventions include Llywelyn acquiring a 'chief minister', a character unmentioned in any known source, before they jaunt off together over what historical evidence clearly shows to be a fictional bridge to meet a fictional character, Hugh Le Strange, who also turns up later as Hugo Le Strange. Presumably this is a modern error for the Roger Lestrangle who commanded the royal army at Montgomery during the war, rather than a real Hugh Lestrangle who died some forty years before Llywelyn! At this point in Wikipedian fantasy, Llywelyn's army is attacked by the fictitious Roger Despenser and the first real contemporary person mentioned in this 'account', Gruffydd ap Gwenwynwyn. It is unfortunate that no original contemporary source mentions the over 67 year old Gruffydd as being present at Llywelyn's killing. Next another character, unmentioned in any contemporary source, strikes Llywelyn down. Perhaps we should christen this character *The Lone Lancer*, but unfortunately real history does not allow for this. Finally in this 'story' another character otherwise unmentioned recognises the fallen, but unrecognisable prince. Wikipedia then goes on to obliquely credit Walter Guisborough with this 'version of events'! As is seen in the main book under the section on Walter, this is completely untrue, although the brave and the

reckless might argue that the above is a garbled and fantastic retelling of Walter's decidedly improbable tale.

Sadly the second Wikipedia narrative is even more fantastic than the first and, we are ardently informed, was written down by monks 'in the east of England'. These undefined monks were alleged to be in contact with Llywelyn's six month old daughter and three to four year old niece, presumably some time after Llywelyn's death, but who knows! In the pre-pubescent version Edmund and Roger Mortimer, together with the fictional Hugo Le Strange and the non present Gruffydd ap Gwenwynwyn, tricked Llywelyn and routed his army before chasing Llywelyn and eighteen retainers (which included clergy) into Aberedw wood where Llywelyn 'gave away his identity'! For this to have worked it would have meant that a prince leading his army into battle resplendent in his princely royal colours of Gwynedd wouldn't have been recognised by his enemies! The silliness of either such account beggars belief and it is incredibly sad that such ill thought out ramblings are even afforded a place on the Internet, let alone find themselves looked at for reference<sup>\*11</sup>. Now that this modern 'version' of events has been examined it can hopefully be relegated to the dustbin of fiction where it richly deserves to be.

It is now only left to state in this discussion of the primary sources, that the purpose of the main book is to look at all the early accounts, sift through them, and try to extract the wheat from the chaff. What will not be examined in the main book are much later tertiary accounts of the death of Llywelyn -

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<sup>\*11</sup> For how Wikipedia functions see, Peterson, E., 'Llywelyn's Last Battle? A Real-life Story of the Consequences of the Wikipedia System' *Essays in Honour of Leena Kahlas-Tasklea*, eds. Tyrkko, J., Timofeeva O. & Salenius, M. [Helsinki, 2013].

as what value has a ‘historical’ record written by authors who were not present at the events they describe and indeed who were separated from it by many generations? Further, what use are their accounts if they have no data to offer apart from much later ‘sources’ - some of highly dubious value - that they have read and often twisted with their own vivid imaginations and thoughts of what may have been occurring. Without doubt a book could be written on the fantasies of ‘historians’, but that is a job for psychoanalysts and not this historian.

After this discussion now come the conclusions reached through painstaking historical research concerning the site of the battle between Llywelyn’s army and the Marchers and the conclusion of how the Prince of Wales met his end. These conclusions have been drawn from the logical and systematic use of original texts, both chronicles and letters, and through them the last recorded moments of Prince Llywelyn ap Gruffydd of Wales has been pieced together as far as we can be reasonably certain. Hopefully you, the reader, will agree that this was done without outside ‘help’ and distortion.