



HISTORY of ABERYSTWYTH

We all think of Aberystwyth as a seaside resort town.

The presence of the ruined castle suggests a coloured medieval history, fraught with battles and land forever changing hands between powerful rulers.

However, there was evidence of human activity in Aberystwyth long before this time, so we thought it might be worth going through the history of Aberystwyth right from the start.

The earliest recorded human activity in Aberystwyth area dates back to around 11,500 years ago during the mesolithic period. The mesolithic period signalled the end of a long and arduous ice age, which saw most of the world's surface covered in ice, leaving only the most hardy plants and animals to survive. As the ice retreated in Mid Wales, this revealed large supplies of stone, including flint at Tan-Y-Bwlch which lies at the foot of Pen Dinas hill. There is strong evidence that the area was used for flint knapping, which involved the shaping of the flint deposits left behind by the retreating ice in order to make weapons for hunting for hunting animals. The flint could be shaped into sharp points, which could be used as primitive spears and other equipment, used by the hunter gatherer to obtain food.

Around 3000 years ago there is evidence of an early Celtic ringfort on the site of Pen Dinas. The ringfort is a circular fortified settlement which was common throughout Northern Europe in the Bronze and Iron ages. What remains of this particular example at Aberystwyth is now located on private land on Pen Dinas, and can only be accessed by arrangement. It has been earmarked by some as the potential site where legendary Welsh beauty, Princess Nest was abducted by her cousin Owain ap Cadwgan, before being imprisoned in Cilgerran Castle in Pembrokeshire. However, other potential sites have also been earmarked and the Aberystwyth connection never truly confirmed.

The first recorded history of the town of Aberystwyth itself dates back to 1109. At this time Gilbert Fitz Richard, grandfather of famous Norman invader was made the Lordship of Cardigan and was as such granted lands by King Henry I, the fourth son of William The Conqueror who successfully invaded Britain in the Norman invasion of 1066. The lands granted by King Henry included Cardigan Castle as well as land where Aberystwyth stands today. Upon this land Gilbert Fitz Richard built the original Aberystwyth Castle which stood on a hill to the south of the River Ystwyth, about 1.5 miles south of the Aberystwyth Castle that you see today.

Gilbert Fitz Richard's motte-and-bailey style fortress was built on raised earthwork, and surrounded by a protective fence, the motte being the earthwork and the bailey being the protected courtyard. Around 1135 the first castle was burnt down by Gruffudd ap Rhys and Owen Gwynedd in an effort to drive the Normans out of Wales. In the following period Owen Gwynedd's brother Cadwalader rebuilt the castle, marrying Fitz Richard's daughter Alice De Clare in the process.

In 1142 Cadwalader became embroiled in an argument with Anarawd ap Gruffydd over the latter's support of the anti Norman campaigns being run by Cadwalader's brother Owen. Cadwalader's men ambushed Anarawd and he was killed. When news got back to Owen Gwynedd, he and his men marched to the rebuilt Aberystwyth Castle and drove out his brother, and once again set fire to the castle raising it to the ground.

In 1158 King Henry II decided to take control of Wales once again. With their help Roger Fitz Richard, the grandson of Gilbert Fitz Richard built another motte-and-bailey style fortress in the Aber Rheidol area (near the mouth of the River Rheidol) which is well documented, but the site has yet to be identified. In the early stages of the 1164 Welsh uprising, the Welsh laid waste to the new castle at Aberystwyth, and it was destroyed by Rhys ap Gruffud, and the area was returned into the hands of the Welsh.

After the death of Rhys ap Gruffud, his son Rhys ap Gruffud II took over all his land and possession, which included a new castle at Aberystwyth, which it is believed was built on the site of the original Richard Fitz Gilbert fortress south of the River Ystwyth. The outcast brother of Gruffud ap Rhys II, Maelgwn ap Rhys assembled a large army in conjunction with the then Prince of Powys Gwenwynwyn and seized the castle and the town of Aberystwyth from his brother in 1197. Having fallen out years earlier, Maelgwn handed over his brother to the Normans who imprisoned him at Corfe Castle in Dorset. However, within a year Rhys ap Gruffud II was released and reclaimed vast swathes of his land in Cardiganshire.

After his death, Rhys II left two sons. In order to return the castle at Aberystwyth to its rightful owners in 1206, Prince of North Wales Llewelyn ap Iorwerth sent an army down to Aberystwyth to take the castle from Maelgwn by force. Upon hearing of this impending visit, Maelgwn burned the castle to the ground. A new castle was built by Llewelyn ap Iorwerth in the area, and was handed over to the two sons, Owain and Rhys. The ditches built to protect this castle can still be seen today.



When Maelgwn attempted to take the castle back in 1212, Rhys and Owain attempted to work towards a peace deal. After giving away their rights to much land, the deal was accepted and Viscount Foulkes of Cardiff strengthened the castle at Aberystwyth with the king's troops. Unhappy with the outcome Maelgwn attacked the castle with his men, and once again it was raised to the ground. However, in an act of revenge, Maelgwn was put to the sword by his two nephews before the year had ended, in an act of support for King John.

Another castle was built by Maelgwn and in 1218 this was once again attacked. On hearing of Maelgwn's partnership with Lord Rhys Grug, Llewelyn ap Iorwerth again sent an army to Aberystwyth and captured the castle with the help of the Norman Earl of Pembroke, William Marshall. In 1256 this area was taken away from the Normans once again by Llewelyn ap Gruffydd, who became the new Prince of Wales.

When the new Prince refused to pay homage to King Edward I in 1276 it started the first war between the English and the Welsh. By 1277 Edward I's men had reached Aberystwyth, and immediately began to build the foundations of a new castle, which is the castle that we see today. This site was chosen because the river to the south and the marshes to the North restricted the lines of any enemies' attacks on the castle, making it extremely easy to defend in comparison to many castles.

In 1277 Edward I issues a charter which declares the area a free borough, and soon after a small town began to appear on the outskirts of the castle, which was not completed until 1289. By 1280 however, the town around the castle is protected by a fortified wall with four gates, one on each side.

In 1282 Bogo de Knoville, the Constable of the Castle was invited to dinner with the local Welsh Prince, Gruffydd ap Maredudd. It was only upon his arrival that he discovered that this was indeed a trap. Gruffydd ap Maredudd's men destroyed much of the incomplete castle, and slaughtered many of the people in the town, all of whom were English. This was to be the start of the Welsh rebellion against King Edward I. By 1286 the castle was almost complete, under the watchful eye of James of St George. King

