

## BYNG'S TOUR IN SOUTH WALES

August 1787

Among the various recorded tours of Great Britain undertaken by 18<sup>th</sup>. Century gentlemen, some of the undeservedly lesser-known are those undertaken by the Hon. John Byng (1743 – 1813) who travelled through much of England and Wales between 1781 and 1794. His records were published as "The Torrington Diaries", in four volumes, for the first time, by Eyre and Spottiswood in 1934.

John was an aristocrat, second son of Viscount Torrington, inheriting the title himself a fortnight before his own death in 1813. His childhood was unhappy, because both his beloved parents died, and he was entrusted to an unkind uncle, the admiral who was famously shot for failing to recover Minorca from the French in 1756. The uncle was, in his nephew's verse,

*To my faults open, to my merits blind,  
'a little more than kin and less than kind'*

After a career in the army, attaining the rank of colonel, he left in 1780 and took up an Inland Revenue appointment in 1782, a career which, though actually quite varied and interesting, he summarised as:

*'His early days were spent in Camps,  
His latter days were pass'd at Stamps'.*

Although Byng professed a lack of learning, in fact he read widely, wrote passable verse, and like many army officers was a competent draughtsman. He was a traditionalist, loving old buildings, especially castles, and old ways, which he characterised as Gothic, and hating pretentious modern manners and modern architecture (ie., Greek revival classicism). His writing is anecdotal rather than scholarly, but with a keen and critical eye.

He travelled mainly on horse-back, often accompanied by a friend or a local guide, and supported by two or more servants with the luggage in a post-chaise. He entered South Wales via Monmouth, Newport, and Cardiff, staying at the Cardiff Arms, and making excursions to Llandaff, Caerphilly and Pontypridd. Space here precludes description, but he comments in general:

*In our ride I ask'd questions of several people, who did not understand English -- From the quantity of lime made in this country, most houses are whiten'd, which gives a gay appearance, as also the very roofs of the houses and churches; dazzling the eyes, and appearing like undissolv'd snow....The town of Cardiff is pav'd by Act of Parliament, as all towns should be, where stone is plenty ... the round hats worn by the Welsh women are when new, very becoming; and being enlarged, the modern fashion in London.*

He is critical of Lord Mountstuart's modern work in Cardiff Castle, and compares re-building in Llandaff Cathedral to a "ball-room", the lead from the roof and most of the bells having been "melted down into the Chapter's pocket". Corrupt or absentee clergymen were another of his pet hates. Noting the declining population of a Welsh chapel, he comments:

*"... but such is the decline of that language (soon to extinguish like the Cornish) ..... This must necessarily happen from the great intercourse with England, and from their Militia having dwelt in English camps. Harping also is in the wane..."*

He made observations on coal, and its uses:

*Coals are sold at the interior pits of this country, at 2 ½ d the sack, containing three bushels: the gentlemen send their workmen to their own pits.....we got amongst the coal pits... and soon mett with numbers of laden horses... All the smaller coals are burnt in the lime kilns, and their lime is reckon'd so strong, as to be sought for all buildings under water; and was used in the building of Westminster, and Black-Fryars bridges. The hay carts, built upon shafts, are well adapted for steep descents, and narrow bridges...*

Another comment may comfort the present-day reader:

*As for the weather, that will never clear up; eternal rain, clouds and chill: -- surely summers were different formerly; or is youth the season of sunshine? For then I thought the summer gay, and warm; but now in my age, they appear cold, and cheerless.*

Byng comments on the "superior beauty" of the Taff and Rhondda valleys, where the woods were full of woodcock in season, and on the ingenuity of Edwards's bridge. Travelling westwards:

*Steep and stoney roads brought us to the village of Clay-Hill, at the end of which stands Dennys Powys Castle; (for here were formerly as many castles as villages...)..an arched entrance over a square space...*

His visit to Wenvoe Castle provokes a typical reaction against "modern" building:

*... this Wenvoye Castle... has been lately purchas'd by Mr. Burt, born in Berkshire, and with the air and pomposity of newly acquired wealth... seeing us in the grounds, he rode up, and desired us to come in, and survey his new-built house... it is a single house, with (of course) an immense front... throughout, exhibits a charming effect of bad taste and bourgeoisie: most glad was I to get away from the owner...*

Proceeding westwards, he passes through:

*A very pleasant common; adjoining the turnpike road, whence are grand views over the Glamorgan Vale, the Bristol Channel, to Cardiff, and the (white looking) town of Llantrissant... on a hill, at the end of the vale... especially that towards Hensoll Park, and that to St.Faggons village... We next passed through the rural village of St Nicholas, and then by the green and wooded park of Sr .J. Aubrey, not far distant from Cowbridge race ground; whence we descended a long hill into the town of Cowbridge;--where we were glad to find that Mr.O (their local guide, seemingly a Mr.Osborne, collector of customs) who had trotted forward, had hasten'd our dinner, at which I eat, for the first time, of a fish call'd sewen, of the small salmon species, and only caught in this neighbourhood.*

Although not mentioned in the text, Byng's synopsis notes record that he stayed at the Bear. Sadly for us he made no further comments on his accommodation. Of course, he was misled about sewen, not realising that it was what in England he would have called sea-trout. To proceed:

*Being left to myself I took to castle hunting (not building), and walk'd a mile to St Quintins or Llanbythian castle and around the old walls and ruins, below which is the rural village of Llanbythian; and then through some pretty meadows, where, beneath the castle hill, I laid myself down to observe the hay making, and the gratifying view on*

*every side: a rivulet at the bottom of the hay-making field; a rock opposite with the ruins of Llandouhe Castle; many milk maids in the vale; with the town of Cowbridge at the end of the meadows, to the right; --quite a scene for the fan painter! The east and western gates of Cowbridge have been lately pull'd down, at the new paving of the town; but the old wall is almost everywhere remaining.*

Some real meat for us here: ruined Llandough Castle visible from below St. Quintins? given that the present tree screen may not have been there, was the house not built by 1787? And by old walls remaining, does he mean the real mediaeval walls or the Edmond's re-build; are our recent dating of this in the 1770s correct? Going on, though:

*I eat today at dinner, and at supper, some excellent blue cheese made near here, which is much to be admired, and resembles, both in color and taste, the blue mold of Cheshire cheese.*

*They boast in Wales, that bugs are unknown; as serpents, &c in Ireland.*

*But a few years since travellers were scarce in this country, and post-chaises unknown; now, the country in these southern parts is become a high road to Ireland; Newton and Swansea are bathing places; and strolling players, with all their mischiefs, will get, nay have got, amongst them.—Their language kept them innocent, and at home; that lost, they read, hear plays, debauch, and emigrate! Whilst the Erse, and bad roads lasted, the Scotchman kept to his country*

*But when people read of riches, and luxuries, they will hunt after them, tho' they perish in the pursuit.*

No comment! A topic for debate, perhaps. One thing is sure, that although Byng elsewhere laments the passing of "civility, honesty and good cheer" experienced by the traveller "before the baneful luxury of turnpikes", the road travel revolution resulting from the activities of the turnpike trusts made his own and other traveller's activities possible. Wales was still foreign to him though:

*Our servants inveigh bitterly against Wales, probably, because they, too, are accounted as plunder: T.B said, this morning 'Here's a fine house, Sr, without a cloaths brush in it'! And Mr Os man looking over the rich Vale of Glamorgan, exclaims 'It is a very barren country'!*

Despite his servants prejudices, reinforced by exploitation, Byng recorded feelings about supposed changes in the South Welsh temperament since the writing of his quoted poem, "The worthines of Wales" by Maister Thomas Churchyard, 1587:

*But times, since Mr.C days, are much changed!—To me the Welsh appear'd as inferior to the common English in civility, as they are in stature and comeliness: particularly the women, who are very ugly and dwarfish. —After this my true description of the human race, I may add that the markets are disgraced by the worst appearance of lean yellow mutton, and starved fowls; that the butter is salt and rancid; and the bread soft and tough, by being baked in cabbage leaves.*

Moving on, space prevents us from pursuing him to Pyle, Margam, Neath and Swansea, etc. His account of Ewenny Priory, however, perhaps tells us something more about him too:

*...I spy'd Wenny Priory, (a religious ruin) to my right... never can be exhibited a scene of greater misery than it now affords!....the church (once a place of respect and grandeur) loathsome and dark and rough*

*as a fallow field! –Some noble monuments mouldring in wretched decay!*

This account was written within a few years of Turner's magnificent watercolour of the interior of Ewenny Priory, portraying a scene of romantic decline. Byng's contrary view perhaps displays an earlier, Augustan 18<sup>th</sup>.Century taste; his writings about castles in particular are descriptive and historical. No "crotchet Castles" here.

Above all, however, the diaries give a vivid and entertaining insight into the essence of 18<sup>th</sup>.Century daily life. To finish, here is his description of an enforced coach trip, on his way home, caused by the failure of his horse:

*Walking: -- or riding, on a tolerable horse, are delights to me; but box 'up in a stinking coach, dependant on the hours and guidance of others, submitting to miserable associates, and obliged to hear their nonsense, is great wretchedness! However, the vulgarity of women is, at all times, better than the brutality of men: two women were my companions, and harmless enough –tho one eternally threatened to be sick.*

Luke Millar.