

Ffrindiau annwyl !

An old man just got on my bus in the hinterlands of Wales, and he is the spitting image of Balin, the hippest of Thorin's company. In fact, he looks so much like Balin that I nearly got up and asked him. I would like to think that Balin might just live in a small town in northern Wales, and that he travels around by the milk-run local bus routes in this region. Since none of the other passengers mentioned it, I decided to go along as well and pretend that he was just an ordinary dude who just happens to look EXACTLY like Balin –except with a trimmed beard.



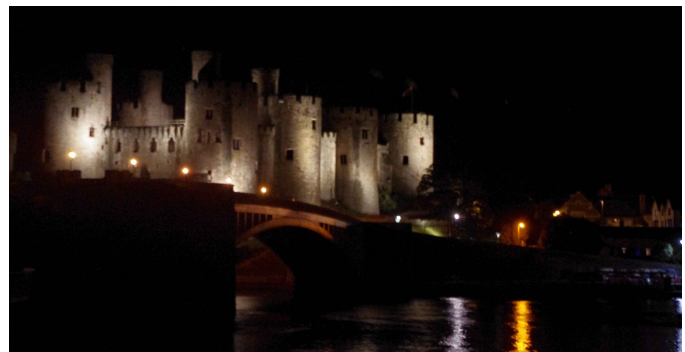
And here's why I'm not at all surprised by Balin getting on the bus: I've come to the conclusion that Tolkien's Middle Earth is Wales. I mean, check out this road sign<sup>1</sup>, and you just try to convince me that this place isn't veritably dripping Middle Earth.



I came to Wales on a whim; before arriving here I knew embarrassingly little about the place. I could more or less locate it on a map, I'd read of an amazing coastal path around the entire country, and I'd heard a bit about their recent attainment of some modest autonomy from the UK, and that's about it. Oh, and they like to eat rabbits. I can confirm the latter through a few menus and one remarkably fast, coastal-dwelling rabbit that I spied escaping from this *Pan sapiens*<sup>2</sup> as if her life depended on it.

Oh...and the [cheese shop skit](#) from Monty Python.

I made no particular plans; at the Marine Educators conference in Plymouth (my reason for being in the UK) a geezer suggested I set my sights on North Wales. So after the conference, I found a town with a youth hostel called Conwy<sup>3</sup>, and got a train ticket to the nearest town to that: Llandudno Junction.<sup>4</sup> I arrived at 10pm and the night-time walk across the Llandudno-Conwy bridge was a treat.



It turns out that the Conwy Castle was one of

- 1 All official signs in Wales are bilingual Welsh/English.
- 2 Did I ever mention that I agree with [the proposal of Wildman et al 2003](#) that chimps and humans are similar enough genetically to be placed in the same genus? Except that the original proposal of Wildman and colleagues was to reclassify chimps as "*Homo troglodytes*" (and bonobos as "*Homo paniscus*"). How typically homo-centric. Instead, it would be far more subversive if we instead were to be officially placed in the chimp genus *Pan*. Of course, in either proposal, it clearly would also follow that our presumed ancestors *Australopithecus*, *Paranthropus*, *Sahelanthropus* etc. would likewise need to be folded into *Homo / Pan*. But I digress...
- 3 Are you noticing the Welsh vowel deficit?
- 4 Double Ls are very common in Welsh and pronounced approximately "kchl".

three (!) such built by Edward I in the 13th century to keep the Welsh at bay. The story goes that the last Welsh Prince of Wales -Llywelyn ap Gruffydd- was murdered in mysterious circumstances, perhaps an internal power struggle, and was replaced by his brother, Dafydd ap Gruffydd. Edward was shrewd, and saw the ensuing political instability as his chance to grab Wales, and its strategic coastal position. So he attacked.

His biggest concern was the Welsh archers, who knew the landscape and would hide out in trees and pick off his troops. So he razed the forests of Wales to the ground, and with that, and massive numerical superiority, and a blockade of the Anglesey straight (thus starving the Welsh people), Edward attained victory.

The Welsh were pissed, and Edward knew his position there was tenuous. So he constructed the three castles -including Conwy- to fortify his troops and offer protection from the certain Welsh



revolts to come. And come they did, with one led by Llewelyn's relative Madog in 1294 being notably successful by capturing and burning the partially-finished Caernarfon<sup>5</sup> castle. Burned it to the ground. Edward retook it and rebuilt it, and instituted collective punishment of the Welsh population for good measure.

Given the account above, some of you may be puzzling about the current "Prince of Wales", who -aside from being buck-toothed and having the most absurdly-caricatured royal accent- is decidedly not Welsh. This despite the fact that the original title went always to Welsh born noblemen. In fact, the Prince of Wales in Llywelyn's time and before was not a "Prince" in the sense of being one step below a "King"-- of England or anywhere else. In those days, the term "King" was apparently unfashionable, and so people who might otherwise be seen as a king called themselves "Prince" instead.

That is until Edward came along.

To establish some semblance of political control over the Welsh, Edward needed to install a puppet as a replacement Prince of Wales, but he knew that there was a rule in Wales that a Prince of Wales could not be one whose primary language was other than Welsh. So Edward promised to the Welsh people that he would install, in due time, a Prince of Wales who was in line with this Welsh tradition.

Then he waited until his first son was born, and proceeded to coronate his infant as Prince of Wales, saying something like "here is your new Prince of Wales, and since he cannot yet speak, he certainly does not speak any language aside from Welsh!"

So, to sum up: Edward was a real prick, and he started the tradition that continues to this day of the eldest male heir to the English throne being named the "Prince of Wales". And they even

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<sup>5</sup> Pronounced approximately "Karnarvin".

continue have the bloody chutzpah to perform each of the coronation ceremonies<sup>6</sup> in Caernarfon Castle!

So I walk into Conwy through the town walls that Edward built and wondered whether there might be a watering hole where a weary traveler might put up his boots (such as they are) and quench his thirst at that late hour.

And it was thus that your humble storyteller guilelessly entered the finest pub in all of Britain. In fact -according to the *Guardian* of London- [one of the finest pubs in all the world!](#)

The Albion Ale House in Conwy, Wales.

I know what you're thinking: did you slip on sheep poop on one of your Wales coastal hikes and hit your head on a rock? English beer sucks. They invented IPAs and they don't even know how to make them right-- they boil the crap out of the hops until all of the floral and fresh character of that lovely *Cannabis* relative is utterly evaporated, and all that's left behind is a borderline emetic bitterness.



Au contraire, mon ami(e). I don't know if it's a new development or just the fact that we don't get the small batch "proper ales" in the New World, but the beers<sup>7</sup> at the Albion were delightful. I should first explain that the genius of the Albion is:

- 1) that it is co-owned by four local small-batch breweries, each trying to outdo the other with their taps in friendly competition;
- 2) no TV, no music;
- 3) a massively committed (and thirsty) clientele, so that the tapped beers are always extremely fresh;
- 4) dog? no problem.

The result is a broad range of constantly rotating, delicious beers, and a lively crowd brimming with enthusiastic and enlightened conversation that doesn't have to be yelled.

I thusly resolved that I would plant my freak flag for my six-day visit firmly in Conwy, and make excursions from there around the North of Wales. The result was two nights of camping, and the other four each capped with a visit to the Albion. And although I always entered alone, I cannot recall more than five minutes *not* spent in the most wide-ranging of conversations with the locals.



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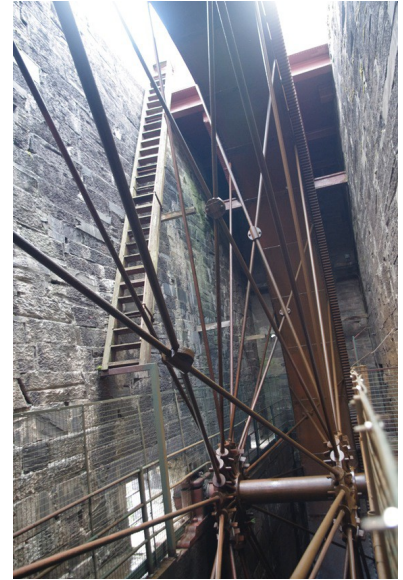
6 Including Charles' on my actual birthday! June 30, 1969. I prefer to think about [another event](#) that coincided with my birth...

7 A fantastic Welsh word: 'cwrw' pronounced "kuru".



One of the bartenders took it upon himself to find me the perfect beer during my stay, and he succeeded: the Autumn Red Ale from the up-and-coming Conwy Brewery. I never really appreciated what "well balanced" meant until I tasted this delectable nectar.

As I indicated, I filled the time between nights at the Albion with day and overnight trips around the region. Highlights included an artisan fair outside of Caenarfon and the Slate Museum at the base of Mount Snowdon - the tallest mountain in the UK outside of Scotland. This museum is on the site of a former, enormous slate factory: for a time, the most lucrative resource in Wales. This particular factory was so remote that they actually had an entire series of tool making, wood working etc. workshops so that they could be totally self sufficient, and it was all powered by the largest water wheel in the UK -fed by the run-off from Snowdon.



While the resource extraction and the massive worker exploitation that occurred at this factory are not to be emulated, the self-sufficiency of its energy supply and tool production are definitely something to learn from. One day soon, we will hopefully at least get back to where we once were!

The absolute highlight of the trip, though, was hiking and camping around a portion of the coastal path in the Llyn Peninsula (this is where Balin lives). For years, the local, regional and national authorities have been acquiring either rights-of-way or outright buying coastal land, and the result is a jaw-droppingly stunning<sup>8</sup> trail from cliffs to coastal prairies to intertidal and there and back again.

I leave you (see *the next page*) with some choice photos from the coastal path, and the thought that if you are to ever question your conviction that anything is possible, I suggest you drop what you are doing, head forthwith to Wales<sup>9</sup>, and go for a hike. And you'll come back feeling right as rain.

...which is only appropriate, since I'm just in time for what promises to be a monumental mushroom picking season! Yay Fall!

Love  
Bug



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8 Actually, not "stun"-ning at all; rather: invigorating, activating, energizing!

9 Metaphorically, of course, since as George wrote (re-phrasing Lao Tzu): "Without going out of your door, you can know all the things on earth."











