

Tour with the Tudors

History's fun when you follow in the footsteps of Henry VII through Wales with majestic castles, cathedrals and coastline, beautiful bays and gardens along the way

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki

US AND OUR 'VAN



Carol Kubicki...

and her husband, Anthony, use their Devon Tempest to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring the historical and natural environments



2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master MWB 2.3-litre. This is our third blue campervan and we have called them all the 'Blue Bus'

Raglan Castle is everything a castle should be: imposing, monumental, with fortified gates, plenty of towers and a moat. What a fantastic place for a game of hide-and-seek! Now a ruin, in the fifteenth century this was a sumptuous fortress-palace among gardens. Looking over the Welsh countryside from one of its towers, I could see this was a fitting place to bring up a future king.

As with many castles, delve in and you find a tangled history. My partner, Anthony, and I were following in the footsteps of Henry Tudor who became Henry VII. Like me, you may have nodded off at school when teachers covered the War of the Roses, a period of conflict when the monarchy flip-flopped between York (red rose) and Lancaster (white rose). Philippa Gregory's novels about this period filled in the gaps for me and reading that Henry Tudor was the first Welshman to be crowned king inspired me to plan a trip to see some of the places associated with the story.

Henry (from the House of Lancaster) was captured and brought to Raglan as a four-year-old ward of William Herbert (from the House of York). Although, in theory, a prisoner, Henry was treated as a member of the family. Descending Raglan's restored grand staircase, I imagined the youngster excitedly joining the guests for one of the extravagant evenings of

entertainment the castle was renowned for.

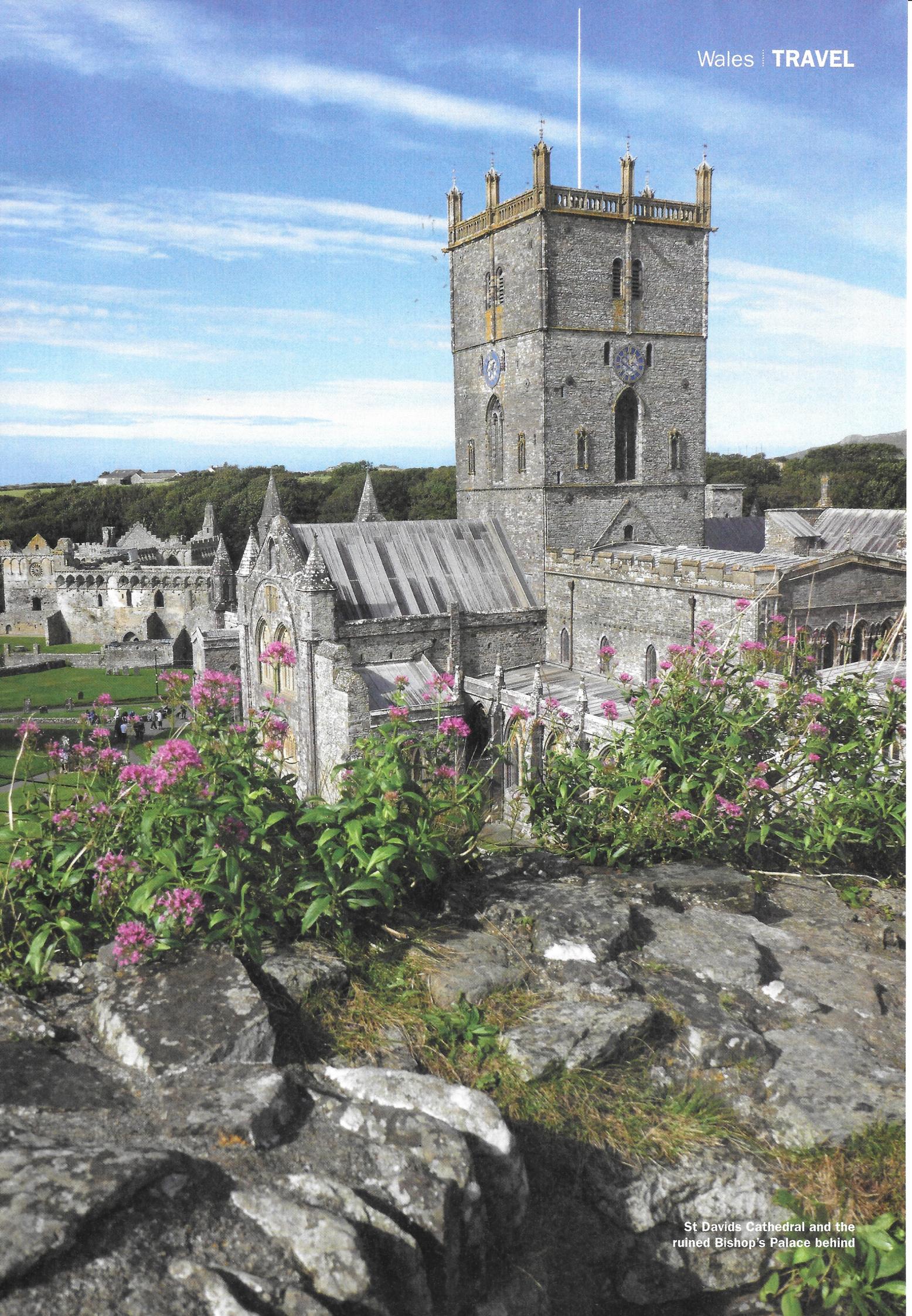
We had driven to Raglan after tooling through Shropshire and Herefordshire in balmy September weather. Henry's story took us further west into Wales, but we couldn't resist swinging off the M4 to visit Kenfig Sands. Paths meandered to the glorious beach by the shore of the picturesque Kenfig Pool and around hummocky dunes dotted with bright purple mats of asters. On the outcrop of Sker Point we peered into rock pools, catching flashes of tiny silver fish.

Our campsite in rural Carmarthenshire was chosen for its proximity to the National Botanic Garden of Wales. That evening a harvest moon rose over the 'van after a crimson sunset and I was hopeful the glorious sunshine would continue.

We woke to thick mist, spiders' webs hung heavy with dew and it felt autumnal. Confident the sun would burn through, we walked the few miles to the gardens to spend five hours enjoying the symphony of plants and sculptures.

Although our legs were tired, we couldn't resist visiting Paxton's Tower – built by a local bigwig to commemorate Nelson – on the hill above our site. Climbing to the first floor, we enjoyed panoramic views over the River Towy valley, the sweeping arc of the National Botanic Garden's Great Glasshouse glinting in the sun. ▶

"A harvest moon rose over the 'van after a crimson sunset and I was hopeful the glorious sunshine would continue"



St Davids Cathedral and the
ruined Bishop's Palace behind

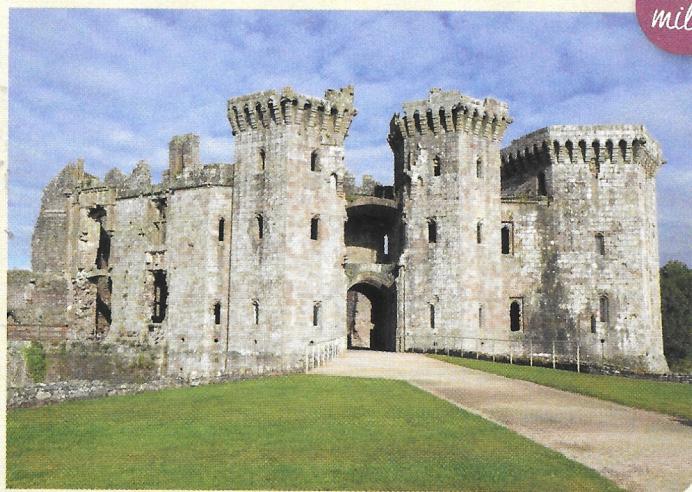
THE JOURNEY

We travelled from home in Morecambe to Wales via the M6/M56 and south to Hereford via Wrexham, picking up the M4 at Newport. We explored south and west Wales and returned north via Aberystwyth, Welshpool and Wrexham. We spent 12 nights on sites in September

THE COSTS

Fuel Average 34mpg.....	£123.91
Site fees.....	£264.29
Attractions Two adults: Raglan Castle, National Botanic Gardens of Wales, Carew Castle, Tenby Tudor Merchant's House, Pembroke Castle, Devil's Bridge Falls trail.....	£76.80
Public transport (Tenby-Manorbier single fare for two, Manorbier to Pembroke return fare for two).....	£12.80
Total costs.....	£477.80

662 miles



INFORMATION

Pembroke Castle is owned and managed by a private charitable trust

 pembrokecastle.co.uk

History Points is a platform covering many aspects of Welsh history, including Henry Tudor's route through Wales to Bosworth

 historypoints.org

Tourist information about Wales, including Kenfig National Nature Reserve

 visitwales.com

National Botanic Garden of Wales

 botanicgarden.wales

ABOVE Raglan Castle is everything a castle should be

BELOW Walking the Pembrokeshire Coast Path near Tenby

We were back on the trail of Henry Tudor next day. Driving through Carmarthen, we chewed over how the fifteenth century squabbling over the English throne surfaces whenever we meet Yorkshire campers. Fortunately, these days the ancient Lancashire-Yorkshire rivalry is a cause for laughter rather than a call to arms.

At Carew Castle I gazed at the substantial ruins across the tidal river and was introduced to Rhys ap Thomas, a valued ally of Henry VII, granted land for his loyalty. Entering the castle, I learned that the green and white colours behind the Welsh flag's red dragon were first used by Henry Tudor at the Battle of Bosworth. In the Great Hall, I read about the jamboree to celebrate the reign of Henry VII in 1507 when Rhys ap Thomas welcomed 600 knights to a festival of jousting and feasting.

The ruins of Lamphey Bishop's Palace are tucked away among trees along a dead-end lane. There is no charge to wander around this once-plush residence set in parkland

and I could appreciate how this bishop's retreat must have been perfect for the honeymoon of Henry's teenage mother, Margaret, and her new husband, Edmund Tudor. Unfortunately, in a country where conflict was rife, within a year of their marriage Edmund was captured in Carmarthen and died of the plague, leaving Margaret both widowed and pregnant.

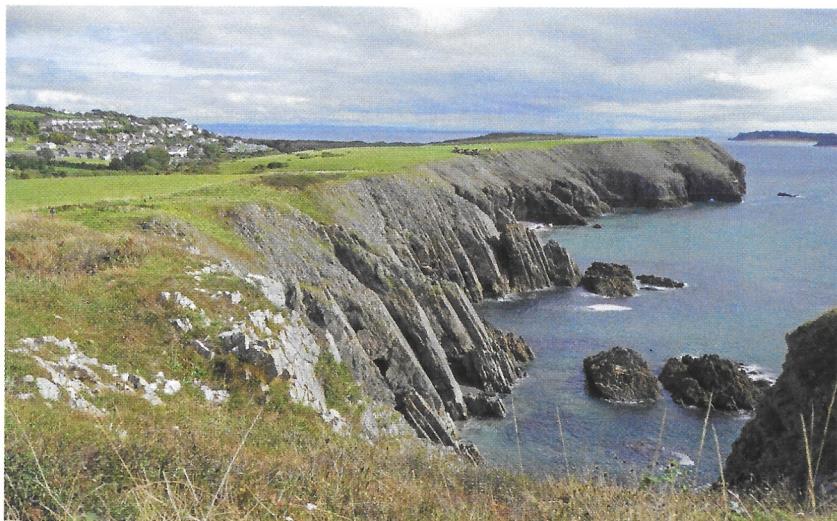
Next morning we walked to Manorbier's café before picking up the coast path for the seven miles of superb scenery to Tenby. We walked around craggy headlands and down to pebbly bays, stopping regularly to take in the views. The sweep of South Beach led us towards Tenby's colourful painted houses.

In the fifteenth century Tenby was strategically and commercially important and Jasper Tudor, Edmund's brother, invested in fortifying Tenby's walls against Yorkist attacks. Inside these walls we found the plaque that marks the escape tunnel Henry and his Uncle Jasper were said to have used in 1471 to reach a ship to take them to safety in France.

The National Trust's Tudor Merchant's House gave me a taste of life in prosperous Tenby when Henry VII was on the throne and this was a busy port. The merchant flaunted his support of the Lancastrian monarch in the stone-built three-storey property, including red rose decorations and Tudor-green furnishings.

Hopping off the bus in Manorbier, we walked back through woodland to our campsite. The pretty village and public transport are what had also attracted us to Manorbier. The next day we caught the train to Pembroke, where Henry Tudor was born and spent his first four years.

Pembroke sits on a river that flows into the sheltered Milford Haven Waterway and we walked from the station around the



TOP TIPS

There is a small car park for Paxton's Tower, but the lanes are narrow with high hedges so care is needed and there are few passing places

The car park at St Ann's Head is large enough for any motorhome and accessible, although some sections of the road there are narrow

Those with mobility problems can access Carew Castle and Pembroke Castle at ground level. At Carew Castle, the walk to the Tidal Mill is wheelchair-friendly. Both castles have toilets for the mobility impaired. Carew Castle has a mobility scooter for hire and wheelchair users and accompanying carer are admitted free of charge

BELOW South Beach at Tenby stretches for just under two miles

remains of the town's walls and the castle. Crossing the river, we paused at Henry VII's larger-than-life bronze statue.

By the time Henry Tudor was born at Pembroke Castle, Jasper had updated the vast building, originally built as a Norman fortress. We arrived in time for a free tour from an enthusiastic guide who made complicated history understandable and fun. As we stood below the 80ft high Great Keep, she dealt with the complexities of the War of the Roses with clarity.

The protection of Jasper and security of his castle encouraged the pregnant Margaret to move from Lamphey to Pembroke after her husband died. From a teenager to a young man, Henry was mostly in exile in France. Meanwhile, his mother built the case for Henry's right to the English throne and plotted for his return.

With support from the French, on 7 August 1485, Henry and Jasper landed at Mill Bay on St Ann's Head at the mouth of the Milford Haven Waterway and marched through Wales to Bosworth.

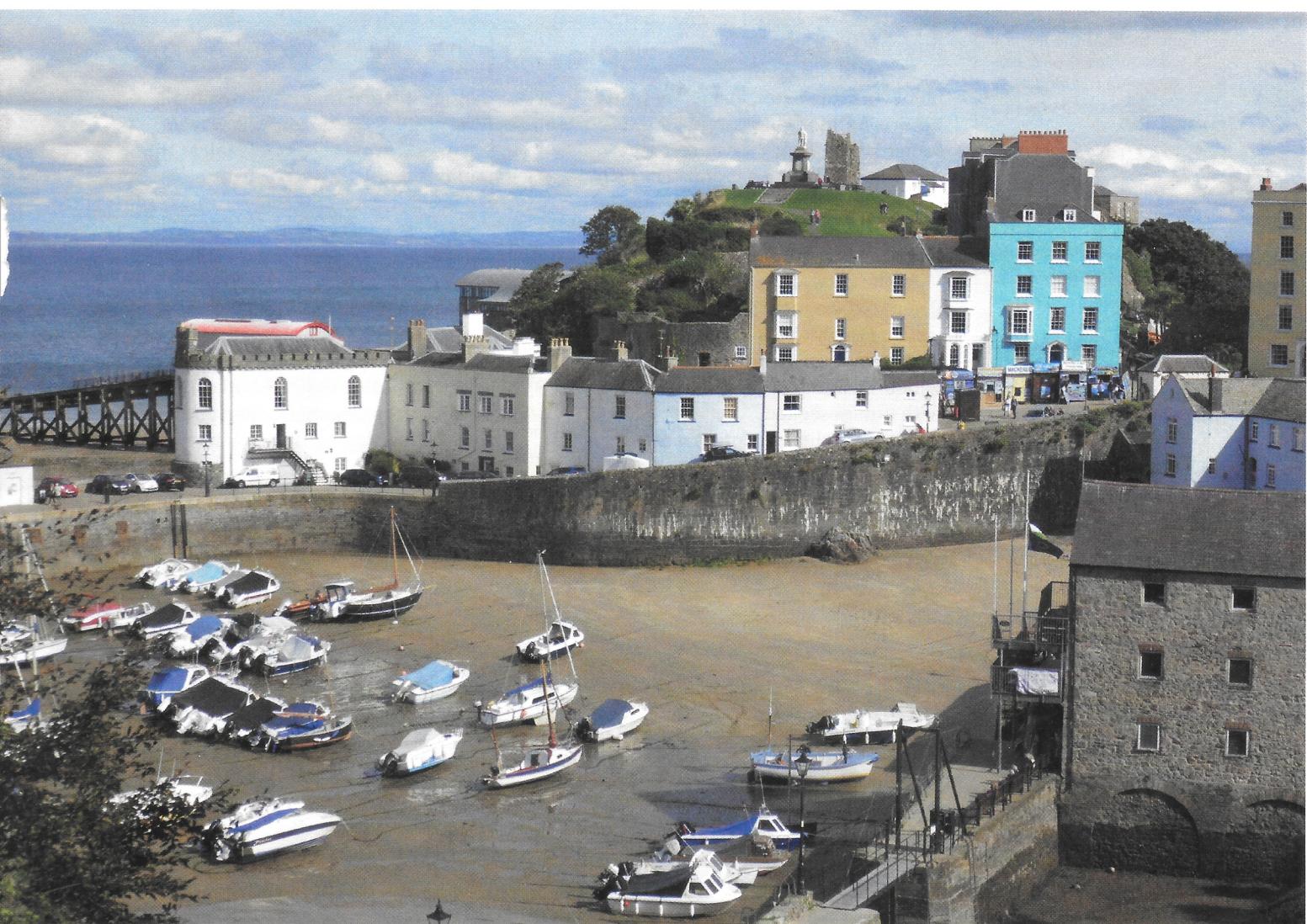
Beyond the watersports paradise of Dale, we parked near the end of the road, hot on Henry's heels.

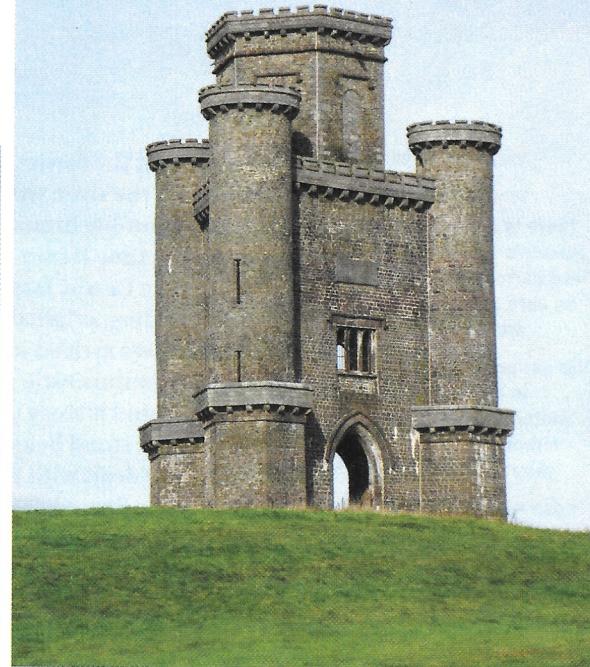
On foot, we wound around the cliffs to St Ann's Head and, above the tiny Mill Bay, stopped to read the plaque remembering Henry Tudor's landing with 55 ships and a rebel army of 4,000. Clambering down by the stream to the pretty cove, where jumbled red sandstone rocks littered the beach, we could see the chimneys of the oil refineries stretching to the sky across the estuary.

We found the remains of HMS *Barking*, wrecked here in 1964. It is said Henry Tudor kissed the ground and recited a psalm as he reached this shore and we lingered in this lovely spot, trying to imagine an invading fleet arriving in this remote part of fifteenth century Wales.

Our St Davids campsite was close to the Pembrokeshire Coast Path and our pitch had a sea view. Henry's army didn't march through St Davids on the way to Bosworth, but his story continues here.

The coastal walking is delightful; we ➤





INFORMATION

Philippa Gregory's *The Red Queen* covers the time of Henry VII birth to the Battle of Bosworth

 philippagregory.com

Interesting blog of Tudor Wales

 nathenamin.com

Cadw protects the historic environment of Wales, including Raglan Castle

 cadw.gov.wales

Information about the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park

 pembrokeshirecoast.wales

The National Trust owns Tenby's Merchant's House

 nationaltrust.org.uk

BELOW Berries on the trees add colour to the countryside above Devil's Bridge; The sun flooding into St Davids Cathedral

picked up the path beside the fast currents of Ramsey Sound, with views of Ramsey Island and natural arches and sea caves in the cliffs below us. Hearing mournful 'songs', we scanned the water and spotted a pair of mating grey seals, rolling and splashing in the waves. On a narrow shingle beach we spotted a white furry pup suckling from its mum until she reared up and chased away a huge bull seal.

St Davids' magnificent cathedral nestles below the town and, inside, we found Edmund Tudor's brass-topped tomb. The father Henry Tudor never met was originally buried in a monastery near Carmarthen, but his body was moved during the Reformation on the orders of Henry VIII, son of Henry VII.

In the nave I looked up at the richly decorated wooden ceiling, a masterpiece of sixteenth century craftsmanship. Shafts of light poured in through south-facing windows, filling the wonderful building with luminescence.

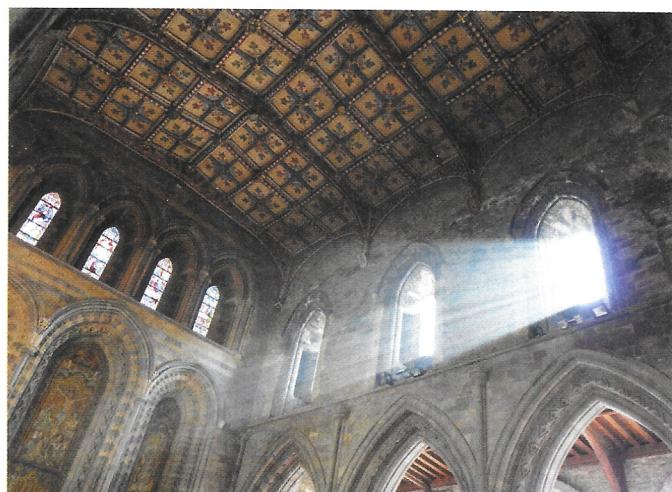
After another exceptional day of coastal

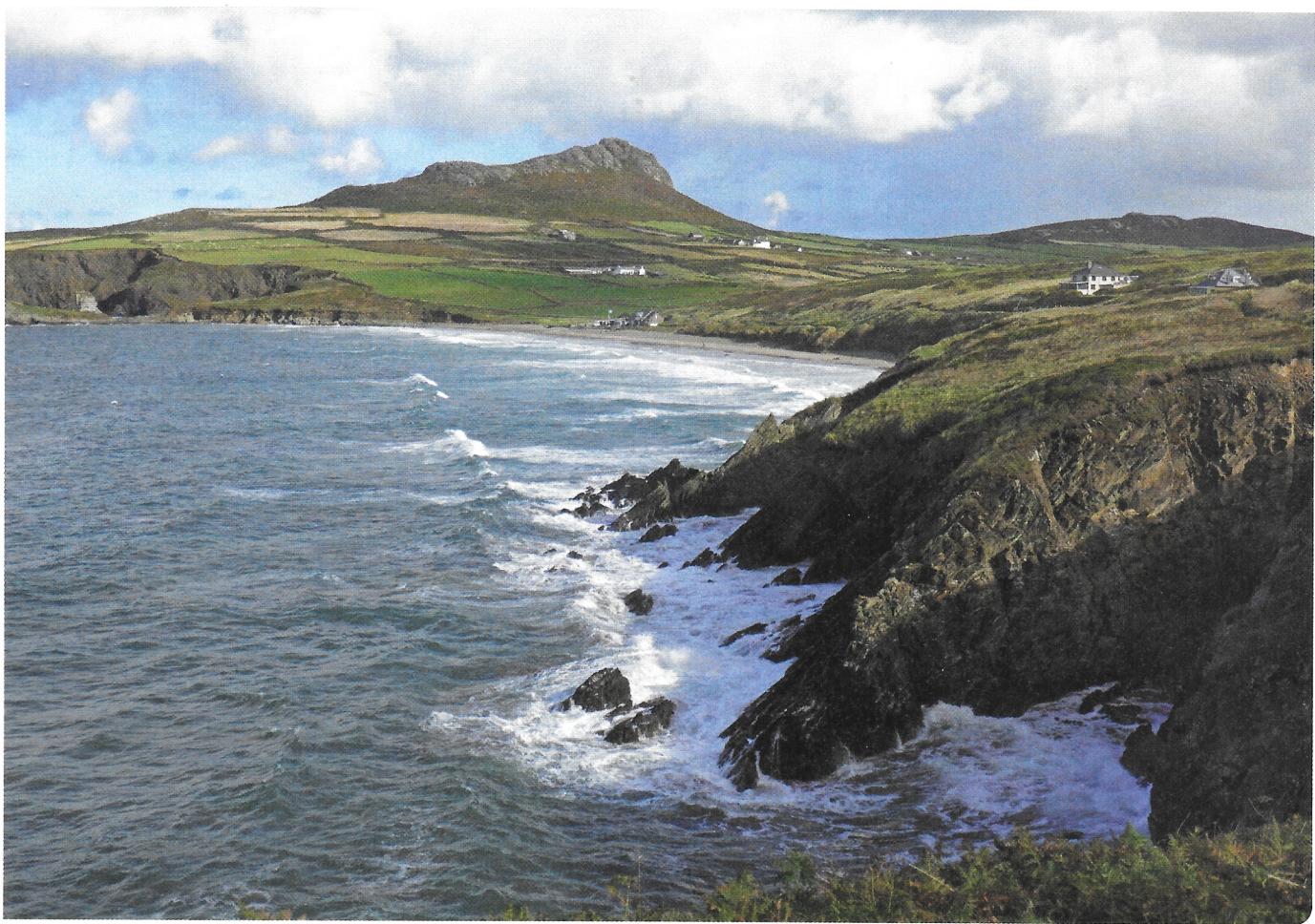
walking around Whitesands Bay, we drove north. Overnight we had been disturbed by heavy rain that sounded as if buckets of water were being hurled at the 'van. This weather continued as we picked up Henry Tudor's footprints through Cardigan and on to Aberystwyth.

We parked on the seafront at Aberystwyth and watched sheets of rain lashing down over a gun-metal grey sea. Henry's army probably had better weather in August when they reputedly took Aberystwyth Castle on their way to Bosworth. We stole a brief look at the remains of the thirteenth century fortress, but it was too wet for lingering over ruins.

In drier weather at Devil's Bridge next day, we paid the entrance fee to visit Devil's Bridge Falls trail, particularly good value after heavy rain. The 675 uneven steps mean this isn't a walk for everyone, but we enjoyed close-up views of gushing cascades.

At the station café, we had coffee while hens clucked around our feet and the Vale of Rheidol Railway's first steam train of the day





puffed away to Aberystwyth. Later we walked along the narrow lanes above Devil's Bridge and enjoyed wide-open views over steep wooded valleys to knobbly hills.

Autumnal weather had caught up with us and incessant rain returned the next day as we drove to Welshpool near the English border. I had planned to walk some of Offa's Dyke above the town where Henry had met with Rhys ap Thomas (from Carew), and almost 2,000 more soldiers strengthened his army. I had also hoped to symbolically wave Henry Tudor on his way to Bosworth, but it wasn't the weather for fanciful gestures.

Instead, we had a satisfying time walking by the canal before crossing the border into Shropshire, leaving Henry to cross Staffordshire and meet Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth in Leicestershire on 22 August 1485.

The death of King Richard ended the House of York's time on the throne and Henry VII, from the House of Lancaster, was the last king to be crowned on a battlefield. By marrying his cousin, Elizabeth of York, Henry ended the War of the Roses and began over 100 years of Tudor monarchs.

We had enjoyed an outstanding trip, all inspired by a Philippa Gregory novel. Having

WE STAYED AT

Giants' Farm Caravan and Motorhome Club Certificated Location (CL), Llanarthne, Carmarthenshire SA32 8JU

01558 668275 caravanclub.co.uk

1 March - 30 October

Two adults, pitch and electric:
From £35

Park Farm Holiday Park, Manorbier, Tenby, Pembrokeshire SA70 7SU

01834 871273

parkfarmholidaypark.co.uk

1 March - 31 October

Two adults, pitch and electric:
From £30

Rhosson Ganol Caravan and Camping Site, St Davids, Pembrokeshire SA62 6PY

01437 720608

pembrokeshire-camping.co.uk

17 March - 15 October

Two adults, pitch and electric:
From £35

Woodlands Caravan Park, Devils Bridge, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 3JW

01970 890233

woodlandsdevilsbridge.co.uk

1 March - 31 October

Two adults, pitch and electric:
From £23

ALTERNATIVE SITE

PREMIER PARK 2023 South Wales Touring Park, Llwynifan Farm, Llangennech, Llanelli SA14 8AX

01554 820420

southwalescaravansite.co.uk All year
Two adults, pitch and electric:
From £20

ABOVE The coast near St Davids is where we saw seals

ABOVE FAR LEFT Paxton's Tower was built to commemorate Nelson

picked up a copy of *War and Peace* by Tolstoy in a Welshpool charity shop, I glanced at Anthony and realised why he looked so apprehensive. He has no idea what will be the next book to inspire me to plan a trip in our Blue Bus! **|||||**