

Eleanor of Castile's Final journey: August-November 1290

Toward the end of July 1290 Eleanor of Castile set out from London on what was to be her final journey. She would return just before Christmas, as the subject of a magnificent funeral procession.

A journey over summer was very much the norm for Eleanor and Edward's court. It is tempting to regard it as a summer progress, but was very far from the extravagant events which the Tudors imposed on their courtiers. Eleanor and Edward instead favoured a working break, almost always in or around Eleanor's properties, combined with decent country for riding. It is this established routine which enables us to see how very different was the final progress, and to explore some conclusions which had to be taken somewhat cursorily in the book.

Three points from the usual routine in particular set the background. Firstly the summer tour would finish with a rush back south for a parliament in Westminster in October. Secondly the pace was hard. The usual daily journey for the Edwardian court was well over twenty miles; distances of considerably above thirty miles were unusual but not exceptional. For example, in autumn 1274 the 34 mile leg from Luton to Northampton was done in a single day. Thirdly the venues for the court's stays were relatively repetitive. Although they preferred not to stay in major palaces in cities, favouring hunting lodges instead, a reader of the itinerary through the years will see the same names cropping up again and again.

What one finds when one looks at Eleanor's final journey is that all of these rules are broken. There was no return in autumn. Instead Parliament was summoned to the wholly unsuitable venue of Clipstone, a sizeable hunting lodge in Nottinghamshire which was part of Eleanor's dower assignment; with the result that attendees were farmed out in spare rooms for miles around. Secondly as will be seen, from the outset the pace was glacial – barely half of the usual miles covered per day. As a result stops were made at some wholly unaccustomed venues.

Something, plainly, was different on this journey. What all of this points to is that Eleanor was not taken ill suddenly, as has often been said. Nor is this conclusion unsupported by outside evidence. Indeed, there is plenty of material which documents a decline in her health from as early as 1286, stretching through the years in Gascony, and following the return in 1289. The early part of 1290, too, had seen records of illness in the wardrobe accounts – I have documented in *Eleanor of Castile: The Shadow Queen* how medicinal waters were sent to her by her son, how images were made in her illness, and how she had begun to make preparations for her own burial. The departure on the summer tour does not, as is sometimes suggested, reflect a recovery. The evidence shows that Eleanor was ill when she set out, and remained so throughout the summer and autumn. But her drive to do her job in managing her properties overrode personal affliction.

The best existing account of Eleanor's final journey to date has been given by Jean Powrie in her book "Eleanor of Castile". However some of the stops recorded in the Itinerary were almost impossible to find in the era pre Google Maps. With better resources I have thus been able to fill in some of the gaps and reconstruct an almost complete itinerary, with (again thanks to the marvels of the internet) distances measured along roads, to replicate the likely distances travelled.

The first part of the journey north, following a brief stay in St Albans, where a cross would later be erected in her memory, was Langley, where Edward of Caernarfon was based, and where Eleanor was overseeing major refurbishments to the property and gardens. After that the journey proper began at the end of July with a stop at Leighton Buzzard near Eleanor's Bedfordshire properties, and Dunstable – only 7.5 miles on - and also later a cross site.

From here the usual progress would have seen the party well into Northampton, probably at Silverstone or Overstone. However on this tour, at least one preliminary stop was made. There is a blank day, and then the party is found at the new venue of Passenham, only 20 miles on from Dunstable. In the context of the pattern which emerges, it seems likely that there was also a stop between Dunstable and Passenham. The more usual stop of Silverstone, a further 9.9 miles on was reached the next day, and was a base for about a week.

Again, from Silverstone it would be usual for Geddington or Rockingham to be reached in one or two steps. However after leaving Silverstone on 11 August, Geddington was not reached until the end of the month. In the interim, the party crept 9 miles to Blisworth, 12 miles to Yardley Hastings, 7 miles to Hinwick and 9 miles to Melchbourne, before heading back to Northampton for some days.

Then the sixteen miles from Northampton to Geddington was spread over two days, with a stop at Pytchley, six miles short. Then, after three days at the favoured hunting lodge at Geddington (another future cross site) the twelve miles to Rockingham (usually a short day's journey) was broken by a night at Pipewell.

The next stage, to Torpel near Stamford (another Cross site, and itself part of Eleanor's property empire) was broken half way, at King's Cliffe, a fairly usual stopping point.

From Torpel it was 17 miles to the next stop, Greetham, and another blank day indicates that another midway stopover may have been made. From there a further 18 miles took the party on to Harby in Leicestershire (not the Harby at which Eleanor was to die), and fourteen more to Nottingham. These were the longest stages of the entire progress.

From Nottingham, the 22 miles to the hunting lodge of King's Clipstone required a stop at Newstead Abbey, ten miles in. Then, in late September, it was 11 miles to Bolsover, followed by a step at Dronfield to cover the 25 miles journey to Tideswell, near Eleanor's properties in the Peak.

From Tideswell a 26 mile journey to Eleanor's property of Macclesfield should have been achievable in one day - as it appears to have been in August 1275. But in fact there were two breaks. The first, at Chapel-en-le-Frith might just be explicable as offering a view of the eastern side of the properties. The second, at Rainow, a mere three miles from Macclesfield, is not.

The journey back from Macclesfield continues the pattern. Macclesfield to Eleanor's property at Ashford was 25 miles. But a stop was taken at "Weyl" - surely Buxton Well, 12 miles along the road. From Ashford to Chesterfield was another 14 miles, and fourteen more to Langwith - just 6 miles short of the destination - Clipstone, where Parliament was summoned for mid-October.

The story told by the journey is clear. It therefore hardly needs the records which show that during the course of Parliament Eleanor's doctors, her pregnant daughter Joan, and the younger children were all summoned (the latter contrary to her mother in law's advice), to know that Eleanor was very ill even in the early stages of the journey. My own view is that the summoning of Parliament to Clipstone was itself necessitated by the impossibility of getting Eleanor back to London at the usual hectic pace.

The journey recommenced after Parliament, heading for Lincoln - a dower property and a base for her friends the Earl and Countess of Lincoln. By this stage the pace drops even below the previous ten mile a day mark. The final stages: Rufford, Laxton, Marnham and Harby are all 6-7 miles apart. Poignantly, Lincoln itself is only just over seven miles from the final stop, Harby just on the Nottinghamshire side of the border with Lincolnshire. But by 20 November, when Eleanor stopped there in a stranger's house, even that might as well have been the moon. She died in the evening of 28 November 1290.