

## How a Pub Visit in Erdberg cost England €63bn

by Wolfgang Geissler



Once upon a time, when schools were still on a Saturday and cinemas had matinees, our Professor in English shepherded forty-two excited fourth-formers on such a day to such a cinema. It was the “Bürgerkino”, now a bank, on Landstrasser Hauptstrasse, in Vienna’s third district. The year was 1958. The film was the 1954 flop “King Richard and the Crusaders”, in English of course but thankfully with German subtitles. It was intended for us boys to be both educational and help with our English, which was pretty low-key at that time. The subtitles are what I remember most, which is not much; the not so riveting dialogue was lost on me. Just as well.

Adapting a Sir Walter Scott novel and with a cast featuring Rex Harrison, Laurence Harvey, George Sanders and Virginia Mayo, you would think, how can a great director like David Butler get it so wrong? However, that's what he did in this awful screenplay. It even made it into the 1978 book “The Fifty Worst Films of All Time”.

The film is supposedly about “Good King Richard” during the Crusades. It was accurate in a few ways, but so much of it was just hogwash. In particular, the Sir Walter Scott notion that King Richard I. (also called “The Lionhearted”) was a good and just man. In reality, he was one of the most vicious and cruel kings in English history more interested in splitting open skulls in battle than ruling his domains in England and western France. History tells us he hardly spent any time in England, to be precise: a whole six months!

Much of the time, he was hanging out with his male friends and slaughtering entire cities—even ones that surrendered to him! Good old Richard ordered after the Acre victory to have 3,000 unarmed Muslim prisoners he originally had held as hostages killed. He was a blood-thirsty maniac by any standard—except, of course, by Sir Walter Scott's, whose monument adorns Edinburgh's Princes Street!

Even though I did not understand much of the conversation in its original English back in 1958, I was very impressed by the impeccable pronunciation emanating from Richard's royal mouth. Little did I know that Monsieur Coeur de Lion never spoke any English, but only his native French and Occitan. English as the language of England was only spoken by all and sundry from the 13th century onwards. Astonishing, the peasant Anglo-Saxons did not understand those who ruled over them, and their elitist rulers did not understand them. From an early time, it appears, language separated the classes. Nothing much has changed since then. Not only Hollywood movies got it wrong but also Sir Walter Scott. I think it's a piece of alternative facts or a bit of English propaganda in his case.

The film is partially based on historical events; the actual deeds are the following: Richard and his forces aided in the capture of Acre. Eventually, Conrad of Montferrat concluded the surrender negotiations with Saladin's forces inside Acre and raised the banners of the kings of England and France in the city. Richard quarrelled with Duke Leopold V. of Austria over his position within the crusade because Leopold's flag had been raised alongside the English and French standards. This was interpreted as arrogance by both Richard and Philip, as Leopold was a vassal of the Holy Roman Emperor. Richard's men tore the flag down and threw it in the moat of Acre. Leopold, naturally piqued, packed his toothbrush and left the crusade immediately.

It is the 21 December 1192, a Monday and presumably pretty cold and possibly lots of snow. Some three kilometres from the walled city of Vienna is Erdberg. Eight hundred twenty-nine years ago, it was a remote place apart from a fortification, which gave it the name "Erdpurch". This was around today's Kardinal Nagl Platz. At the corner Schwalbengasse and Erdbergstraße 41, the third district of Vienna, on the very spot of the Asian Restaurant Jiang was the "Rüdenhaus". This is where the hunting hounds were kept but also an inn. Not a tourist destination in the 12th century, but somehow, Richard the Lionheart ended up here. Hungry, probably thirsty and freezing. Whether his royal ring gave him away when he took his turn on the spit, a favourite hypothesis by historians, or he asked to the astonishment of the locals for "une grande bière s'il vous plait", is not recorded. Whatever it was, someone ran the three kilometres to the court of Duke Leopold V. in the city and reported to him that Monsieur Coeur de Lion was having a roast chicken and a pint down in Erdberg.

Leopold must have thought that all his Christmases have come at once and had him arrested immédiatelement. Whether Dick Plantagenêt, as they called him in the film I mentioned earlier, managed to finish his roast chicken before being bundled off to Dürnstein, we'll never know. At Easter 1193, Richard I. the Lionheart was transferred by Emperor Henry VI. from Dürnstein to Speyer and then to the Trifels fortress. On 4 February 1194, Richard was finally released from custody.

Richard the Lionheart was the victim of an international conspiracy in the winter of 1192. In addition to Duke Leopold, Richard's mortal enemy, the French King Philip II. Augustus, the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI. and Richard's brother John are involved. In captivity, the warrior Richard the Lionheart also reveals unexpected traits: for example, he writes a song - apparently in deep depression. In it, however, he not only laments his fate but also uses it to his advantage. With the help of the fastest media channel of its time, the Troubadours, Richard's call to contribute to the ransom goes viral in a very short time. The ransom that Richard has to raise for his release – around three billion euros in today's value – has left its mark in Austria to this day: The cities of Wiener Neustadt and Friedberg were founded, Vienna and Enns were fortified, and a massive fortress in Hainburg on the Danube built.

The third district of Vienna, Landstraße, consisting of three parts: Weissgerber, Landstraße and Erdberg, features heavily in my story, which is no coincidence. I was born and grew up here. Post-war, from 1945 till 1955, Landstrasse was under British occupation. In 1958 we boys were indeed taken to watch this film "King Richard and the Crusaders" in the "Bürgerkino" on Landstrasser Hauptstrasse, of which I remember precious little. And we have come full circle with this fascinating account of our Leopold and Dick Plantagenêt that so dramatically is associated with Erdberg, only ten minutes walk from where I live, which occurred on a cold Monday, the 21 December 1192..

**The Austro-British Society is looking forward to your views and comments!**



*About the author*

**Wolfgang Geissler** is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society and a Committee Member of the United Kingdom Citizens in Europe. He has lived and worked for 40 years in the United Kingdom. In 2009 he settled again in the 3<sup>rd</sup> district of the City of Vienna

The views expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the opinions of the ABS.