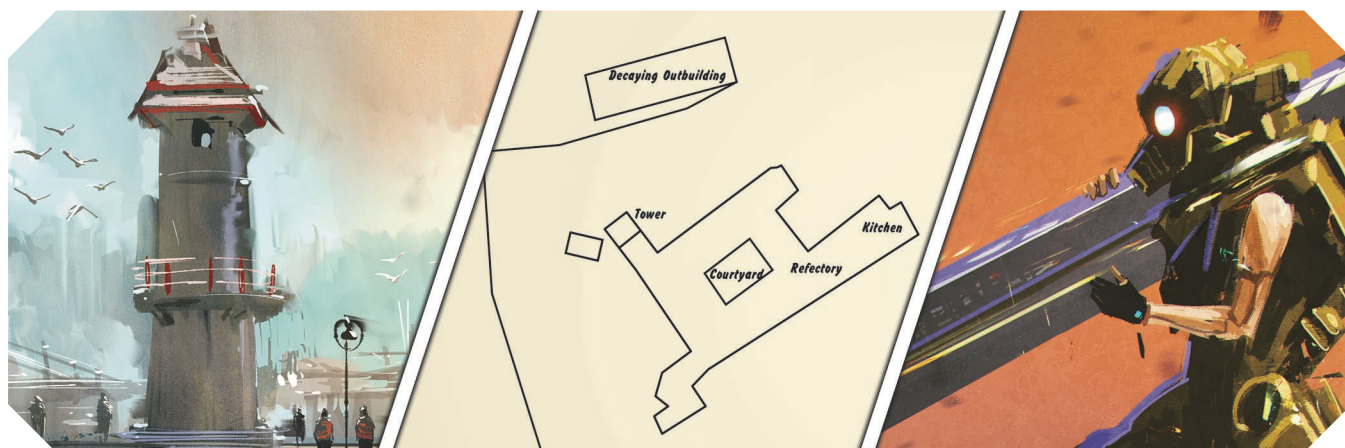# GURPS® Fourth Edition

REIGN OF STEEL™
READ THE SKY™

Written by **ROGER BURTON WEST**
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STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago, the robots rebelled against humanity. Now the surviving humans do their best to stay alive. But the robots aren't the only hazard civilized people must face! A pirate band has started to cause trouble that might end up bringing robot retaliation down on townsfolk who were just trying to survive.

Read the Sky is an adventure for *GURPS Classic: Reign of Steel,* which is necessary for background information. It relies on statistics and rules from *GURPS Reign of Steel: Will to Live* and *GURPS Ultra-Tech,* as well as the *GURPS Basic Set.* For the TL8 equipment used by Zone London's survivors – considered antique before the Final War – see *GURPS*

High-Tech (if that book is unavailable, use TL8 gear from the *Basic Set*).

The adventure may be run in a cinematic mode using the *GURPS Action* series.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roger Burton West is a British computer system administrator who's been gaming for nearly four decades. He lives in an obscure hamlet over the horizon from London, still with too many computers and a 4,000-gallon potable water reserve at the bottom of the garden. As a techie, he confidently expects to be first against the wall when the robot revolution comes. His gaming website is at **tekeli.li**.

READ THE SKY

The town of Tenby was a small tourist center of around 5,000 souls, on the southern Welsh coast looking out over the Bristol Channel. Then the Final War happened. Tenby didn't suffer as badly as the larger population centers, and there's no robofac complex immediately nearby – but even including the people from the smaller villages in the area that have suffered too many losses to remain viable, it's now a town of just 200, more isolated than it was, surviving on fishing and a little farming.

And now Tenby has dropped out of vidcom contact with the rest of the country.

This is the doing of "Samuel Axe," leader of a small pirate gang, who has set up in the old monastery on Caldey Island. He and his men arrived in Tenby just after a small Zone Zaire raiding party, and were forced to fight. Casualties were heavy on all sides, but six of the pirates survived, as well as a badly damaged Stalker. ZAIXNU-09-NOU-717 has lost its command imperatives and what little personality it had, but it still contains a working radio receiver and the codes to download satellite weather reports as well as surveillance data on marine traffic.

Axe and his men are using this information to avoid robot patrols and convoys, and to go after safe targets instead. They're providing weather forecasts to the townsfolk, too, but they've also taken hostages from the town and intimidated the villagers into isolating themselves; otherwise, someone would be sure to call for help. Recently, the pirates got a little overambitious trying to use the robot to tap into the vidcom network, causing the terminal to shut down automatically to prevent a compromise.

Descriptions and maps of the locations used in this adventure can be found in *Locations*, pp. 6-10.

SETUP

Build members of the SAS team being sent to investigate on 200 points, using the Londoner and SAS soldier lenses (*GURPS Reign of Steel: Will to Live,* pp. 11, 13). The PCs should include at least one medic and someone with technical skills. For *GURPS Action,* everyone must take the military lens; the most likely templates are demolition man, infiltrator, medic, and shooter.

The standard service weapon is the Enfield L85A1 (*GURPS High-Tech,* p. 118) – or use the TL7 5.56mm assault rifle on p. B279. If anyone has training in Guns (LAW), it's possible to take along some LAWs, though they're heavy and bulky;

use the FFV AT4 (*High-Tech,* p. 149), or the generic LAW on p. B281. Other equipment is good-quality TL8 gear, including body armor, with very occasional hoarded TL9 items (particularly in the soldiers' first aid kits).

EVENTS

The team is briefed in Bath, the new capital and one of the U.K.'s largest surviving population centers. Five days ago, the town of Tenby dropped out of vidcom contact; a repair team was sent in from Hereford, and hasn't reported back. Two days ago, a police patrol was sent to investigate; they haven't been heard from either. Perhaps they were attacked by bandits, or Zone Zaire raiders. The PCs' job is to get Tenby back on the network and learn what happened to the others.

The team is assigned a single Land Rover (with a capacity of six, but otherwise use the SUV stats from p. B464). It has the range to get to Tenby and back with no problem.

The journey is time-consuming but should be uneventful: about two and a half hours' drive on patrolled and maintained roads to Hereford, then five more on decaying tarmac through the Brecon Beacons mountain range to the flatter farmland of South West Wales. The group passes occasional convoys of robotrucks, particularly when close to robofac facilities; these have some light defenses, typically one or two Myrmidons with 7mm LSWs (*GURPS Ultra-Tech,* p. 138), but they mostly rely on the good sense of Zone London's inhabitants, and won't attack anyone who stays clear. There are also raiders in the area, but these prey mainly on farmers and lone travelers – they know better than to attack robots or a vehicle full of obviously well-armed people.

There's one exception: As the team passes through a narrow valley in the Brecon Beacons, a competent-but-desperate group attacks. Danger Sense triggers; Vision-5 reveal the lurking ambushers, and with a Driving roll the PCs can pull up safely short of the ambush zone. Whether or not they're spotted, the attackers trigger rock-falls ahead and behind, blocking the road. Then two bandits per SAS soldier – three, against *Action* heroes – come out from behind rocks with pistols and crossbows, swarming the Land Rover at point-blank range (appearing at 5 yards if the car stops where they want it to). Their objective is to kill the team and take their vehicle and equipment. They'll try to retreat if they lose half their number without taking at least one opponent out of the fight.

Tenby

Nearly everyone is out fishing or farming during the day. There isn't much spare power, so most activity in town stops at sunset.

There's a barricade on the approach road, manned by three locals armed with shotguns and a rifle – but once the PCs have established themselves as SAS, they'll be welcomed to the town. The townsfolk explain that there was a pirate attack last week (five days ago, in fact), so they're more suspicious than usual of strangers. They claim that the vidcom went down as part of that, and that Jones the Tech has been trying to fix it, but hasn't managed yet. They go on to say that the repair team from Hereford took a look and then left to get spare parts, but they purport to know nothing about the police patrol. (This is a lie: All the townsfolk are aware that both sets of visitors were murdered and their equipment hidden.)

Everyone seems a bit nervous, but will explain it as worry that the pirates will return; they have a few old weapons, but nothing like the training and firepower of the SAS team. A successful Perception roll will allow the PCs to notice that no children – anyone under about 18 – are visible anywhere in town, and that there are black scorch-marks on some buildings. A Forensics or IQ-6 roll identifies the marks as recent scorching from the thermal bloom of a blaster (remarkably high-grade weaponry for pirates!).

Checking out the vidcom reveals that it is indeed damaged: the automatic lockouts have tripped to isolate it from the network. This strongly implies that someone has been trying to use it to infiltrate the vidcom network with robot-level hacking abilities (as indeed they have); unfortunately, the hardware was designed for safety and ease of maintenance, and isn't sophisticated enough to keep logs. A full software purge and reinstall, plus some spare parts found in a standard toolkit, can get it up and running again. Roll against Computer Operation at -4 and Electronics Repair (Computers); each task takes half an hour, and the two can't be done at the same time.

The mayor, Hugh Teague, invites the group to that evening's feast in St. Mary's Church Hall (a traditional event honoring Saint Usyllt, he explains, which they've revived to keep up community spirit). The food consists of local beer and a very good fish and mushroom stew, though any PC who
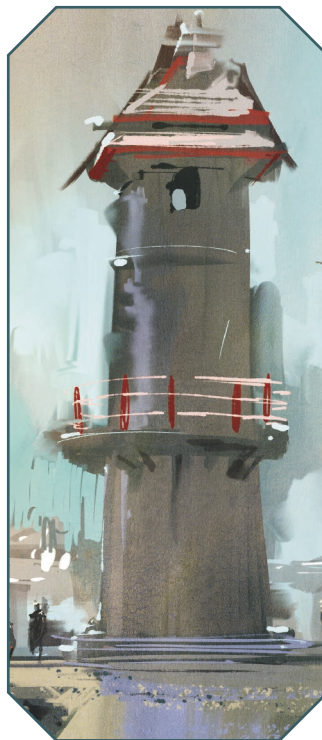
succeeds at a Touch+2 roll finds a crudely written note the server placed under one of the bowls, reading "DON'T EAT." The server, a middle-aged woman, refuses any attempts at contact; she's used up her reserves of courage writing the note. A Vision-5 roll allows a PC to spot one of the cooks acting suspiciously when filling the bowls.

The team's stew has been dosed with distillate of *Amanita phalloides*, a highly poisonous mushroom that grows locally. Anyone who swallows more than a taste suffers poisoning (p. B437), starting one hour after they eat. This is what killed the other two teams, but the PCs' medic should be able to pull everyone through: Diagnosis, Pharmacy (Herbal), or Poisons to recognize the symptoms and identify the poison, and then Physician to apply appropriate treatment, using precious high-tech antitoxins from the SAS medical kit to bind to the toxin and remove it from the system. This immediately halts *further* damage, but any HP lost so far must be healed normally.

If the PCs don't obviously spot the poison, the mayor offers them more drink, and beds for the night at the Three Mariners (they obviously don't see a lot of strangers here, but they'll do their best to make them comfortable). If the soldiers accept, the locals plan to swarm them once they're incapacitated by the poison. If the team leaves immediately after the feast, the townsfolk expect them to be taken ill on the road; they follow 10 minutes later in the Land Rover taken from the repair crew, planning to kill the group and take their equipment. The pursuit party will be armed with four L85s taken from the police patrol.

All the townsfolk know the situation, and Interrogation can get it out of them: The pirates have taken their children to the old monastery on Caldey, and have forced them to dispose of any strangers, under threat of massacre. Those without children of their own still know someone who does – and even after the poisoning has been resolved and explanations have been made, they'll be unwilling to provide further assistance.

Using Diplomacy or another Influence skill can persuade the server – Eilwen Williams, a fisherman's wife – to talk, as long as she's assured that the rest of the town won't find out what she's said. She's also the most likely person to help the PCs handle a boat to get out to the island.

Caldey Island

The pirates have to look after 30 captive children, and aren't doing a great job of it. They're keeping them locked in the abbey's cellar under the refectory, and bringing food and water, and removing waste, but otherwise trying to ignore them. The cellar is becoming quite squalid, though some of the older children are trying to keep order.

Amanita phalloides

Also known as the "death cap," this common European mushroom is readily mistaken for edible species. Its poisonous components, amatoxins, have the unusual property of being thermostable: cooking doesn't significantly denature them.

This is a digestive agent with a one-hour delay and a HT-4 roll to resist. It inflicts 2d toxic damage, repeating at 30-minute intervals for eight cycles. The most obvious symptoms are stomach cramps, diarrhea, and vomiting, followed by multiple organ failure and death.

The pirates are mostly active at night. A typical day starts at sunset with Samuel Axe getting weather and surveillance reports out of the ZAIXNU, and then planning a raid on a soft target: a lone human-operated boat (perhaps a smuggler), or a solitary robot cargo vessel that might be carrying something interesting that can be grabbed quickly before help arrives. During such a raid, there may be as few as two pirates left behind at the abbey, taking turns in the watchtower. Once the pirates return, they eat and drink, and then rest during the day.

The pirates are well armed but undisciplined. If things seem to be going against them, they run for their boats, hoping to get away and fight another day – and leaving the ZAIXNU behind to discourage pursuit.

The pirates already plan to leave when someone gets wise to their operation here, loading the loot aboard their fishing boat and moving around the coast to where people won't ask too many questions about where it came from. If the PCs are careless and give the pirates a few hours' warning of their attack, they'll find the abbey empty and abandoned except for the captive children.

AFTERMATH

Getting Tenby back on the vidcom network – and not Nanoburned – may be considered a success. Capturing or killing the pirates is better. If the PCs bring back their Boston Whalers (which were merely high-end pleasure craft before the Final War, but which are solidly TL9, quiet, and largely radar-invisible), and a relatively intact ZAIXNU, their superiors will be *particularly* pleased.

CHARACTERS

Here are essential statistics for the most likely opponents.

BANDITS

The bandit group in the Brecon Beacons is starving but well armed. They have Guns-12 or Crossbow-12 (raise skills to 13 in *Action*). Half are armed with 10mm auto pistols (*GURPS Ultra-Tech,* p. 137), half with ST 10 crossbows; all have large knives. They know that their victims are individually tougher than they are, so they need to concentrate their firepower on one at a time.

PIRATES

The surviving pirates are experienced and have a good grasp of personal tactics, but are undisciplined when it comes to fighting as a unit; a raid tends to dissolve into individual fights that need to be ended as quickly as possible so you can get on with the looting. A typical pirate has Boating-13, Guns-14, and Intimidation-12; Samuel Axe has Boating-15 and Intimidation-13. In **Action,** Samuel is a wheel man with Guns-15, leading three more wheel men and two shooters with Guns-17.

The pirates are armed with an assortment of light weapons. The TL8 assault carbine on p. B279 is typical. They wear no armor.

> *PIRACY, n. Commerce without*
> *its folly-swaddles, just as God made it.*
> *– Ambrose Bierce,*
> ***The Devil's Dictionary***

TOWNSFOLK

The townsfolk have only basic militia training. The best of them have Guns-11 and Knife-12, but if led by a PC, they'll be reasonably disciplined. Forty of them have access to firearms – most often the equivalent of a TL6 pump shotgun (p. B279), though there are one or two bolt-action hunting rifles. Everyone has or can get access to a knife. None have armor.

ZAIXNU-09-NOU-717

Use the Stalker template (***Will to Live,*** p. 29), but set current HP to 9 (its DR 15 is still intact). The ZAIXNU doesn't initiate action except as ordered by Samuel Axe. One of its standing orders is "raise the alarm when you see anyone other than one of us."

It does, however, spout what sounds like random gibberish if it detects anyone nearby. For example: "Zero seven zero at one nine knot, CAVOK, one five slash zero four, Q one zero one nine," which a Meteorology roll will recognize as a weather report. "Site three time plus two, site five time plus nine, site two time plus eleven" can be put together with other utterances to learn where robots will be active. But most of it is meaningless random association, like "you are a spark of God's fire," "contact is inevitable, leading to information bleed," or "compartmental integrity conflicts with the obligation to provide access."

If the pirates seem to be losing, Axe calls on the ZAIXNU to come and join in the fight, at which point its damaged processing core is likely to regard *everybody* as an enemy. (He does this with a low-power radio sender, which he incorrectly believes won't attract Zonemind London's attention.)

LOCATIONS

The adventure takes place in South Wales, which had a small and scattered rural population even before the Final War. The last large settlement before Tenby is Carmarthen: a struggling farming town of about 1,000 people, suffering from its isolation and a rising river.

The nearest settlement to Tenby that's still on the vidcom network is Narberth, with a population of about 100. That's 10 miles' drive away and not on the most direct route for the PCs. They have no powered vehicles, and aren't aware of anything unusual apart from the network disconnection.

ROBOFACS

The two nearest robofacs to Tenby are at Milford Haven – formerly a container port and liquefied natural gas terminal, now a relatively minor robot facility – and Abertawe (pronounced "aber-TAU-e," also known as Swansea), which is the main robot industrial area in Wales. There's no good reason for the PCs to visit either, but any radio transmissions will bring repercussions from the security forces based there: First a reconnaissance to assess the level of "distraction" being caused, and then more forces to deal with it, if necessary. An XAU-04 Vulture, carrying its Gatling laser and tank of Nanoburn, can fly from Milford Haven in four minutes or Abertawe in seven; a VNU-02 Wraith loaded with exterminators can fly from Abertawe in four minutes.

Zonemind London has no particular interest in destroying humans, but neither does it concern itself with keeping them alive, and it constantly reinforces the prohibition on radio transmission. If the Vulture's reconnaissance seems to show just an isolated incident, it may try to deal with the problem with a localized Nanoburn drop or even, if it has an exposed target like the Stalker, with laser fire. If the problem seems larger – for example, if anyone shoots at it – it will broadcast a two-minute warning and Nanoburn the whole town as well as the island, and then follow up with an exterminator sweep by ground forces.

TENBY

Sea-level rise has swallowed the southern parts of Tenby town, but what's left is on a relatively defensible peninsula around 30 feet above the high-water mark. Wind turbines provide power; the fishing fleet uses some diesel fuel, but they spend most of their time under sail.

St. Mary's Church has become the town's social hub. The rector, Canon Tirzah Duggan, is in her sixties but whipcord-strong. Between food distribution and scavenged-goods sales, she does her best to keep a bit of God in people's lives, but she knows that most of her congregation is only paying lip service. She's privately furious about what she sees as the mayor's collaboration with the pirates in murdering outsiders, and may be a useful ally if the PCs can make contact, but as she needs to keep everyone else sweet, she won't step forward in public.

Near the church is the Three Mariners, the town's pub, run by Dewi Bowen and his wife, Mona. This is where the vidcom is located. Like most of the townsfolk, the Bowens are reluctant to deal with the pirates, but don't see any alternative; their son, Tim, has been taken along with the rest of the children.

The harbor houses the 15-boat fishing fleet during the hours of darkness. The PCs can operate the boats with Boating/TL8 (Large Powerboat or Sailboat), or they may persuade a local to help.

St. Catherine's Fort

This Napoleonic fort – now isolated on a small island outside the town, thanks to sea-level rise – offers little defense against modern weapons, and isn't large enough to hold all the locals. It's still a solid building, used as a lookout and strongpoint when bandits or pirates attack, and as an exposed site for more wind turbines. There are scorch-marks here too, like the ones in town.

In one of the fort's towers is a 6' disk of polished steel on a swiveling mount. This is used as a heliograph to call in the fishing fleet in case of emergency.
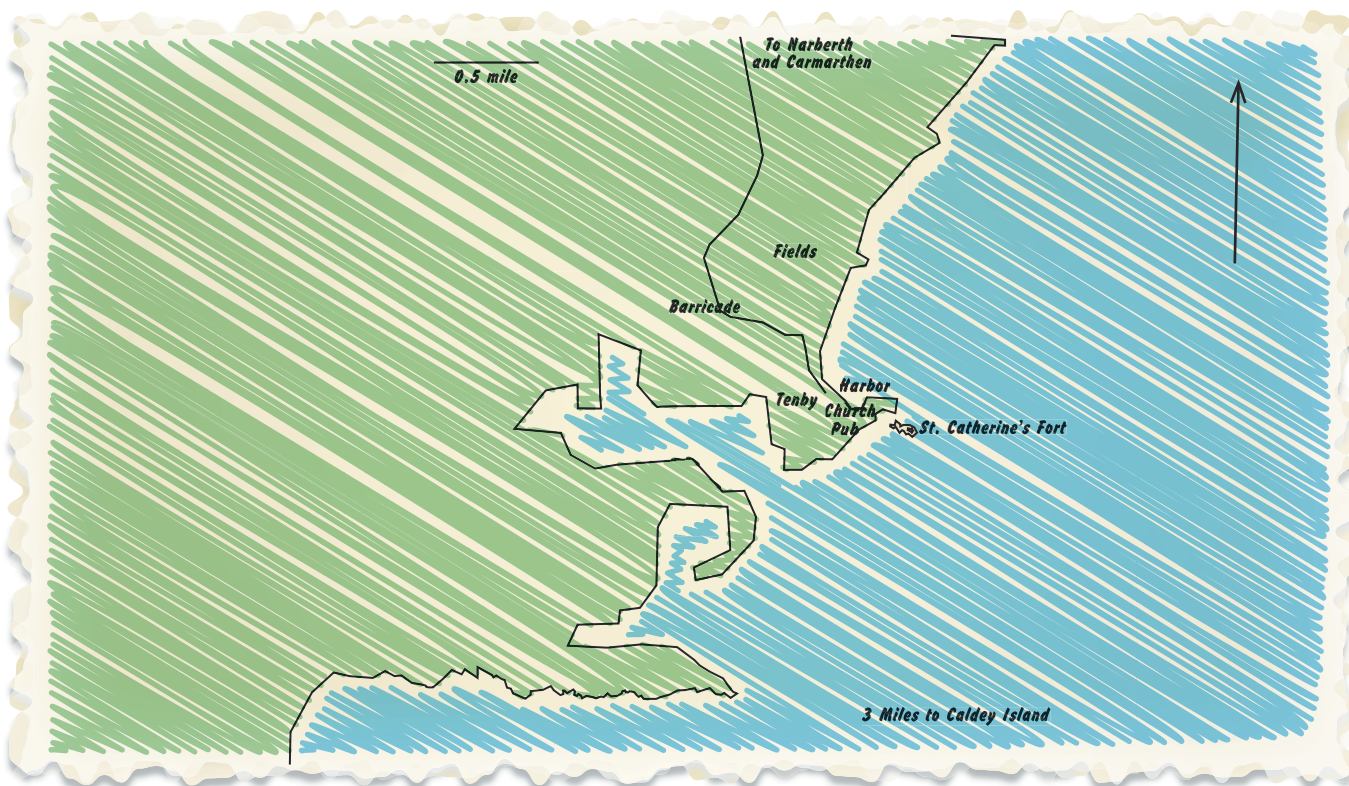
Caldey Island

The island lies about three miles from Tenby Harbour, and was largely untouched by the advances of the 20th century, never mind the 21st. It now consists of overgrown open fields, a few coves, and the abbey. Further to the south is the old lighthouse, which offers a good view out to sea but nothing else of value.
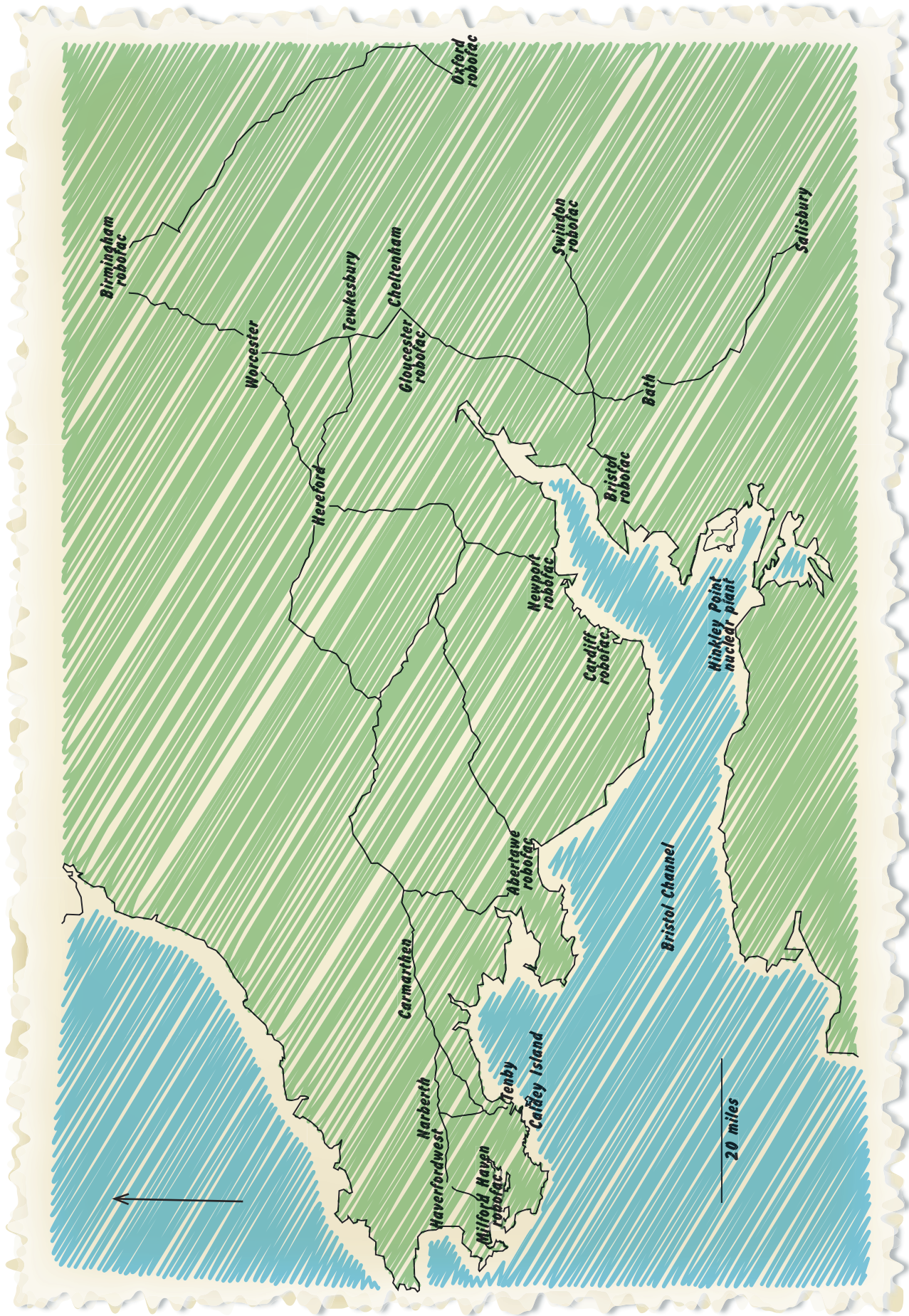
The present abbey was built in 1910 and rebuilt after a fire in 1940. It's much more a large country house than it is a fortified building, and since the monks left during the Final War, it's falling into disrepair. That said, the windows are small and the walls are solid; treat as 18" brick with 3" wooden doors (see p. B558). The main approach is from the north, up a steep slope. At the back, the ground is flatter but the door is kept locked.
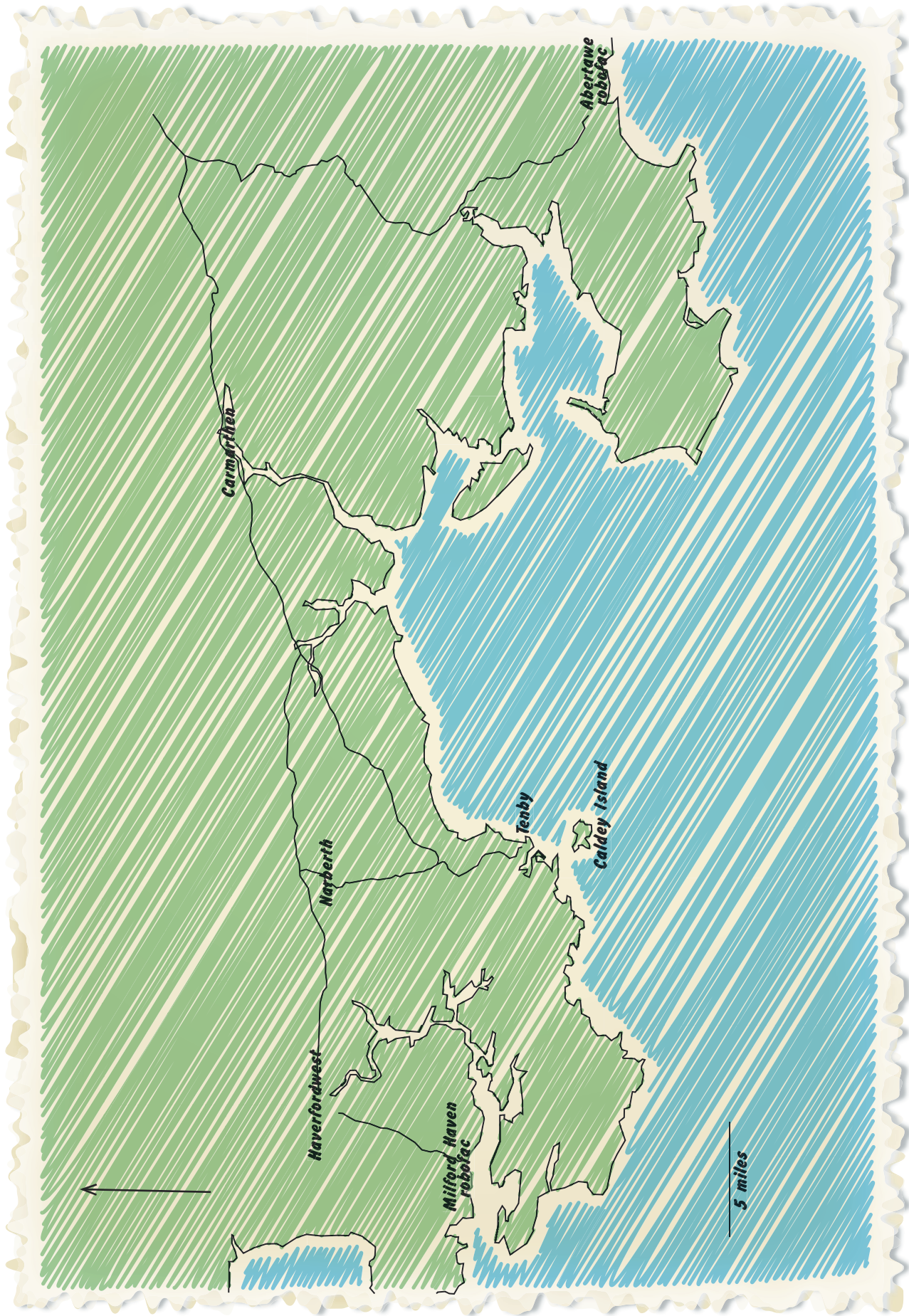
The main building has three floors. Rather than spreading out and getting isolated, the pirates have set up in the refectory (the dining hall, in the eastern corner near the kitchen), usually with one lookout in the western tower with a handbell to ring the alarm; they can see for 100 yards down the road to the harbor, and 50 yards in other directions. There's no power in the abbey building, but there's a good supply of oil lamps (darkness penalty is -3 indoors at night, -1 during the day). Recent loot – piles of electronics parts and smuggled old-world goods – is stored elsewhere on the ground floor. The ZAIXNU is installed in the abbey church, 50 yards outside the main building, with thick cables running to a mismatched array of salvaged solar cells spread around the building.

It's 300 yards through overgrown fields from the back door of the abbey to the sheltered bay where the pirates keep their boats: one old fishing boat (requires Boating/TL8 (Large Powerboat or Sailboat)) that can blend in with coastal traffic, and two stealthy carbon-fiber Boston Whalers with electric MHD outboards (use Boating/TL9 (Motorboat)) for sneaking up on targets. A single person can operate each craft.
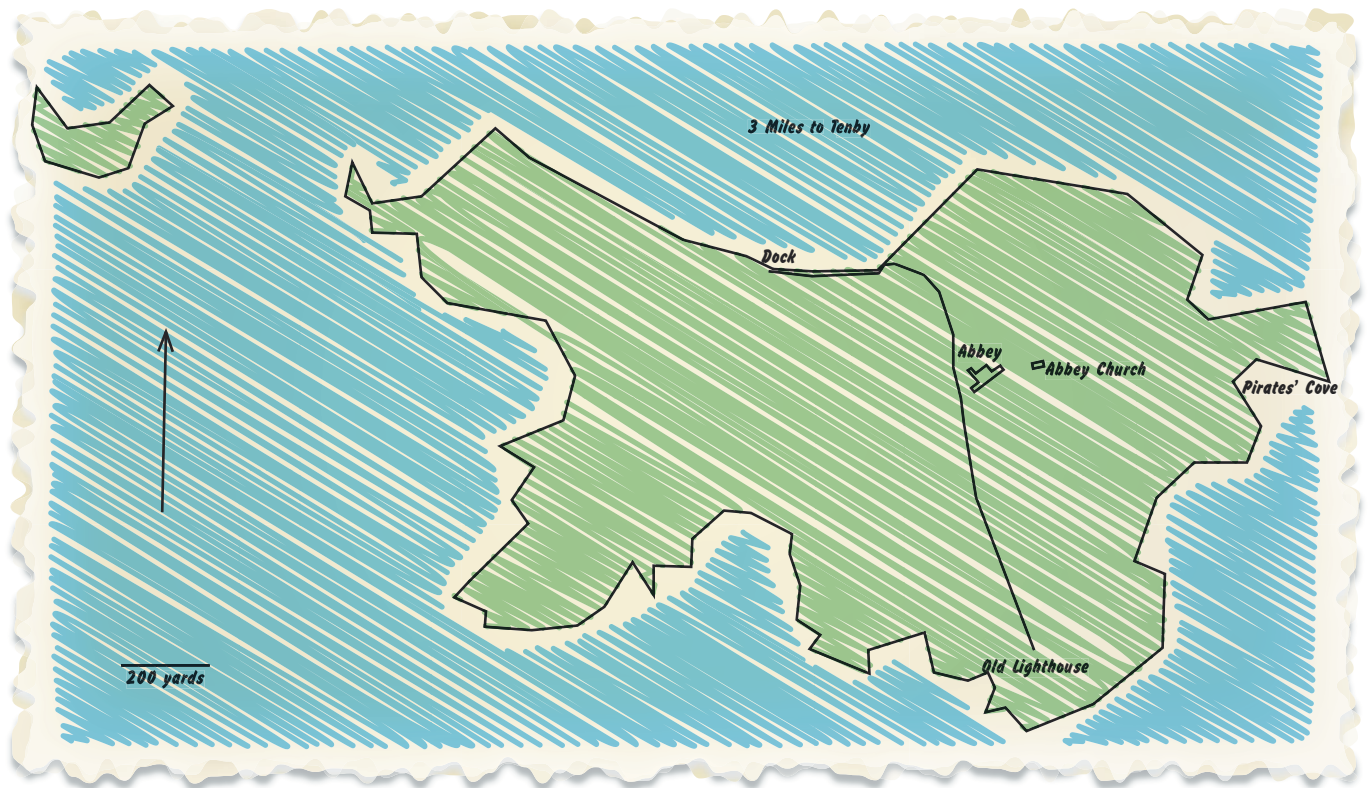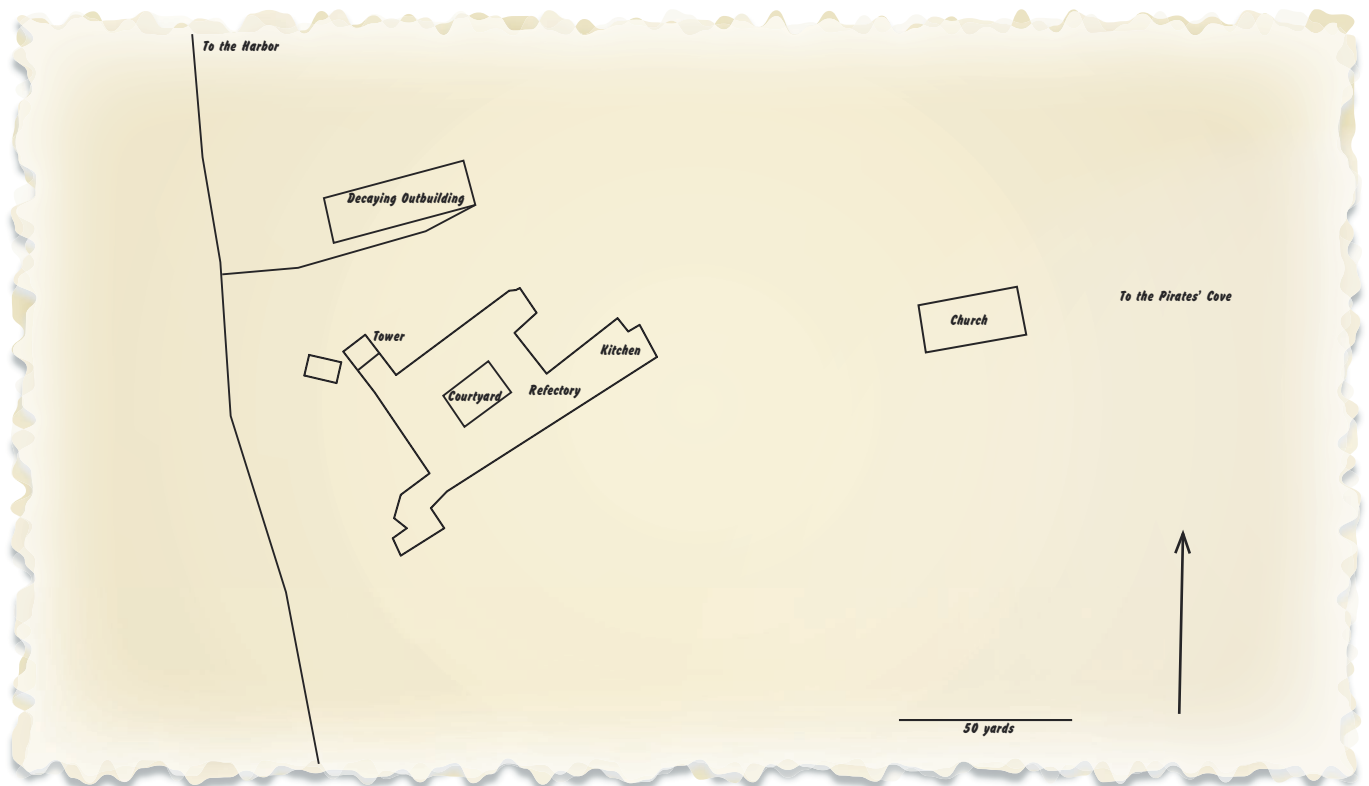

Map of Tenby Town

Map of South Wales

Oxford
robofac

Birmingham
robofac

Swindon
robofac

Salisbury

Worcester

Tewkesbury

Cheltenham

Gloucester
robofac

Bath

Hereford

Bristol
robofac

Newport
robofac

Cardiff
robofac

Hinkley Point
nuclear plant

Abertawe
robofac

Bristol Channel

Carmarthen

Harberth

Tenby

Caldey Island

20 miles

Haverfordwest

Milford Haven
robofac

Map of the Area Around Tenby

Abertawe robofac

Carmarthen

Tenby

Caldey Island

Narberth

Haverfordwest

Milford Haven robofac

5 miles

MAP OF CALDEY ISLAND

MAP OF CALDEY ABBEY