LLAWHADEN CASTLE

Llawhaden, Pembrokeshire, Wales SA67 8HL

14th May 2011

This was an impromptu visit on our way back from a holiday in Pembrokeshire, so I had no idea what to expect. The ruins of Llawhaden Castle are to be found amongst trees and farmland, situated on a hillside overlooking the River Cleddau, in the Pembrokeshire village of Llawhaden, about 10 miles east of Haverfordwest.

Its commanding position suggests it played its part as a frontier fortress on the national Landsker Line, which I had never heard of before. This name denotes the language boundary in Wales, between the mostly Welsh-speaking and English-speaking areas in Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire. The English-speaking areas south of the Landsker Line are referred to as 'Little England beyond Wales' and are known for having been English culturally and linguistically for many centuries, despite being distant from the actual England-Wales border.

As we approached, the castle gatehouse looked as if it once would have been very imposing and strategically placed for any skirmishes between the opposite sides of the Landsker Line, namely the Welsh northern lands and the Anglicised southern lands. Certainly, the ruins inside the gatehouse also gave the impression of once having been a very substantial building.

The gatehouse (photo by Alan Santillo)

The site is thought to have originally been a motte and bailey castle, but the current ruins are what remains of a bishop's palace from the 13th to 14th centuries. Llawhaden and its adjoining remote lands were owned by the bishopric of the diocese of St Davids and after the Norman Conquest, when Marcher Lords were tasked with guarding the Welsh Marches (the borderlands between Wales and England), the area became an ecclesiastically-ruled Marcher Lordship.

In 1115, Llawhaden Castle was first built at the instigation of the newly appointed Bishop Bernard, a Norman bishop from the nearby cathedral at St Davids. In addition to the castles of the Marcher Lords, the Church was also responsible for fortifications built to protect the vast landed estates it had acquired when the Normans had taken control of Wales.

When first constructed, it was merely an earth and timber ringwork fort. Although the description speaks for itself, a ringwork fort is specifically a fortified defensive structure that is usually circular or oval in shape – basically a motte and bailey castle without a motte. Defences were usually earthworks formed as a ditch and a bank surrounding the site.

In 1192, Llawhaden was attacked by Lord Rhys, a powerful leader in South Wales. The castle was captured and in the following year, it was largely destroyed by a gathering of Welshmen, which resulted in its abandonment.

Decades passed before Norman rule was re-established in the area. The bishops of Llawhaden regained control in the early 13th century and significant changes were made, the most notable being a stone curtain wall that replaced the earlier, more makeshift, wooden defences.

The population of Llawhaden grew and in 1280, the wealthy and influential Thomas Bek was created Bishop of St Davids. The following year, he was granted a royal licence that bestowed privileges of borough status on the village of Llawhaden. This meant that a weekly market and annual fairs could be held, which would greatly aid the borough's financial position and status.

Bishop Bek had a hospital built for the poor on the western side of the settlement, but he was no fool, because by building up the economic activity of the area, the power of the Church was simultaneously increased. By 1326, records show that there were 126 plots rented by burgesses, the majority of which were Englishmen (a burgess being a freeman of the borough).

As well as the markets and fairs, a water mill and a fishery made Llawhaden the richest estate in the diocese of St Davids. It remains unclear whether Bishop Bek invested in the castle, although surveys of the time record a small garden to the east and a four-acre park further north-east.

However, during the 14th century, Llawhaden Castle was largely rebuilt into a fortified mansion. Historians are unable to agree about which bishop had this work carried out, the contenders being Thomas Bek, his successor David Martyn, or Adam Houghton, the bishop between 1362-89. However, Cadw, the historic environment service of the Welsh Government, have settled on Adam Houghton. (Out of interest, Cadw is a Welsh verbal noun meaning keeping or preserving.)

Regardless of who was responsible, improvements included the heightening of the curtain wall and the addition of multi-angular towers. The residential aspect was made much grander, with private apartments, lodgings for guests, quarters for a permanent garrison and a courtyard. A substantial double-drummed gatehouse was constructed before the end of the 14th century, still standing to its full height, and in fact, the majority of the current ruins date from around this period.

Side view of the double-drummed gatehouse (photo by Alan Santillo)

As well as being a fitting residence for senior clergy with high ideals, the location of Llawhaden Castle, between the bishop's palace at Carmarthen and those at St Davids and Lamphey, was obviously ideal. Apparently, these so-called 'Princes of the Church' felt they were above travelling more than a day's journey between palaces in the diocese of St Davids and expected to live as extravagantly as their secular Norman equals. High ideals indeed.

The castle had an oval animal pound near the gatehouse, ensuring supplies for the large kitchens, necessary for the lavish banquets of the ecclesiastical élite. There was no need for a fishpond, because salmon and sewin (sea-trout) fishing was excellent in the eastern stretches of the River Cleddau, that was fortuitously situated below the battlements.

In the early 15th century, King Henry IV (c.1367-1413, reign from 1399), ordered the castle to be garrisoned, due to the Welsh rebellion led by Owain ap Gruffydd (c.1359-1415), probably more famously known as Owain Glyndŵr. This turned out to be its last military use, after which the castle seems to have been ignored by the diocese of St Davids. However, in 1486, Bishop Hugh Pavy took a shine to it and took it upon himself to celebrate mass in the castle chapel.

The 16th century saw a number of anecdotal incidents, including the storming of the castle by a troop of horsemen, to rescue an unfortunate woman who was incarcerated within its walls. Bishop Edward Vaughan made repairs to the castle in the 1520s, but on the death of Bishop Richard Rawlins in 1536, an inventory of the building gave details of only a feather bed and some other minor items. How the mighty had fallen…

In the 1540s, the castle fell into further decline after the Laws in Wales Acts (1535 & 1542) of King Henry VIII (1491-1547, reign from 1509) had abolished Marcher Lordships. Henry, of course, was of the Welsh Tudor dynasty and the acts were parliamentary measures annexing Wales to England. England's legal system was extended to Wales and English administration was introduced, with the idea of creating a single state.

The first bishop to be appointed after these acts was William Barlow. He was an enthusiastic Church Reformist approved of by Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), who was a leader of the Reformation and Archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of King Henry VIII, believing as he did in royal supremacy over the Church.

Bishop Barlow was unimpressed by the establishment at St Davids, venting his opinion by having the lead stripped from the castle roofs and, so legend has it, selling the lead to pay for the dowry of one of his daughters. This resulted in serious damage to the castle, after which it never recovered.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries, between 1536 and 1541, led to the final demise of Llawhaden Castle, with no resistance from Protestant reformists like Bishop Barlow. It was completely abandoned and finally in 1616, Bishop Richard Milbourne was given a licence to demolish it.

Before this could actually be carried out, Bishop Milbourne was transferred to the diocese of Carlisle, but the castle gradually fell into total disrepair and suffered the fairly common ignominy of being plundered for building stone.

Plundered for its stone

The site nowadays is privately owned by the Lord of the Manor of Llawhaden and although it's managed by Cadw, with free entry, it seems little-known. We therefore began our exploration of its 13th-century ruins not knowing quite what to expect, entering through the imposing gatehouse located on the southern side. This is where the drawbridge would have been, as the castle is surrounded by a ditch, designed to be crossable only by the drawbridge.

Inside, there would have been a portcullis, door and arrow slits, although the gatehouse was built to look impressive as well as for defence, with trefoil windows in external facades. There would also have been provision for housing, with vaulted chambers warmed by fireplaces and large windows to allow in light, with stone benches on the sides. At the back of the eastern side, a four-sided 13th-century tower was incorporated, complete with garderobes. I can honestly say I've visited far less substantial ruins.

Atmospheric ruins

In fact, I found the ruins to be pleasingly atmospheric as we looked around. The castle as a whole was pentagonal in shape, although the western and north-western sides are unfortunately no longer there. The accommodation would have been provided in the northern wing in a rectangular shape, with two projections facing towards the north-east side of the ditch.

The ground floor would have contained the necessary storage areas, such as warehouses and pantries, while a central great hall would have occupied the first floor. This would have been flanked by the kitchen and another service room on the west side, with the bishop's private accommodation on the east side.

The luxury-loving bishop's quarters would have enjoyed the extravagance of a large window overlooking the castle gardens, as well as garderobes placed in the thick walls. No vows of poverty for the bishops!

Spiral staircases within the thickness of the perimeter walls would have allowed the convenience of internal communication, with the entrance to the great hall leading through an external staircase from the courtyard to the first floor. Access was originally on the left, but this was blocked when a neighbouring bakery was built, after which it moved to the right.

To the left, to the right – but definitely no jumping up and down as we climbed, peered and speculated about years gone by. As the castle stands today, the southern range with two polygonal towers and a five-storey vestibule remain in the best condition. I was concerned the deep garderobes looked rather dangerous, but on the other hand, the prominent castle well was safely protected.

More ruinous views

It was gratifying to find out Llawhaden Castle hadn't been completely forgotten. In 1930, the First Commissioner of Works and Public Buildings organised a group of 1,3000 previously unemployed men to carry out renovation work on several castles for six months. Llawhaden Castle was one of the beneficiaries, having moats and ditches dug out, plus the removal of ivy and undergrowth.

If we'd had more time, we could have explored St Aiden's Church on the banks of the river below the moat and half a mile away the Iron Age promontory fort, Holgan Camp. Next to the village hall is the 13th-century ruin of a hospice founded by Bishop Bek in 1287. It never ceases to amaze me what's actually out there!

The well graces the grand old ruins (photo by Alan Santillo)