RAGLAN CASTLE

Raglan, Monmouthshire, Wales NP15 2BT

18th March 2019

We were staying in Newport and had been deprived of castle visits all winter, so could hardly wait to set foot on fortified ground again. The morning was dry with a promise of lessening cloud and possible sunny intervals, so we very much looked forward to making use of our English Heritage membership cards that would give us discount to a Cadw castle (Cadw being a Welsh word meaning to keep or to protect).

The car park was conveniently within the castle grounds and the impressive-looking castle beckoned us hopefully, but it was so cold immediately we stepped out of the car! I don't know from which direction the deceptive weather was emanating, but the air felt like it had proceeded straight from the frozen wastelands. To top it all, I had no gloves. However, I did have pockets and a yearning for some hands-on history, so my pockets did good service when the hands-on history resulted in frozen fingers.

Approach to Raglan Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

It was obvious from the start that this visit would be in the nature of a reconnoître, because I had no idea of the background history and the sky was refusing to show any blue for best photographic purposes. I didn't mind, though, as the idea of a forthcoming summer visit felt good and Alan's camera was capable of producing much better skies than mine.

As we began our tour armed only with a leaflet, I soon realised from various information boards that I had no previous knowledge whatsoever about the part this castle had played in history. I therefore made it my business to put this right upon returning home, so that on the anticipated future visit (when the sky would be blue with light, fluffy clouds, the air would be beautifully warm and there would be few people standing in the way of photo-taking), I would have a much better chance of properly appreciating what I was looking at.

The grandest castle built by Welshmen (photo by Alan Santillo)

An early motte and bailey castle may have been built at Raglan site after the Norman invasion, as archaeologists have discovered a possible bailey ditch. After the invasion, nobles known as Marcher lords had been appointed by the King of England to guard the Welsh Marches, the name given to the border lands between England and Wales. Interestingly, a Marcher lord is the equivalent of a marquis in France, or a margrave in the Holy Roman Empire.

These powerful Norman-English barons were notoriously acquisitive, building castles to hold the land they seized and making alliances with local leaders to overcome fierce resistance from native Welsh princes. If it had been bad enough in England, it was even more complicated in Wales. It was, in fact, the Marcher lords of Usk who controlled the minor lordship of Raglan.

The first recorded lord was Sir Walter Bloet (?-c.1198), an Anglo-Norman knight. Bloet family members were considered lower nobility, with estates in south-west England and the Welsh Marches. They built a manor on the site, surrounded by a park and held it for 200 years, until it passed by marriage to William ap Thomas.

Born into a minor Welsh family, William's success in local politics enabled him to rise through the ranks and marry into wealth. In 1432, he purchased the manor of Raglan, where he had been a tenant, for the bargain price of £666 13s 4d.

By the early 15th century, after successes and failures in the fight for Welsh independence, Wales was under English rule. The launch of successful military campaigns in France by King Henry V (1386-1422, reign from 1413) opened a path to power, as well as prestige for those fortunate in battle and trade.

William ap Thomas was one such beneficiary, known as the Blue Knight of Gwent after having fought at the Battle of Agincourt with King Henry V in 1415. As well as being knighted for his service, William celebrated his growing status and wealth by building a grander home. The Marcher lord of Usk at that time, Richard of York (1411-60), gave him permission to replace the old Bloet manor house with a castle – one of the last true castles to be built in Wales.

Work began in the 1430s with a programme of building that established the castle's basic shape, although most of it was subsequently built over. Only the south gatehouse, Fountain Court and the Great Tower date from that period, with the Great Tower later known as the Yellow Tower of Gwent. What with the Blue Knight and his Yellow Tower, I was sensing shades of a colourful history.

After the death of William ap Thomas in 1445, the castle passed to his son William, who perhaps diplomatically dropped the Welsh version of his name in favour of the surname Herbert. Like his father, William Herbert (c.1423-69) was a supporter of the House of York and known as 'Black William' for reasons unknown, although the colour reference was pleasing.

When the Wars of the Roses began in 1455 and open war broke out between Lancastrians and Yorkists, William Herbert led the Yorkist forces in Wales with much success. In 1461, he became 'Baron Herbert of Raglan' and in 1462, he was invested as a Knight of the Garter. He was even described by contemporary poets as the 'national deliverer' who might achieve Welsh independence.

In 1468, he and his brother Richard advanced against the last Lancastrian stronghold in Wales, Harlech Castle, where Jasper Tudor (and his young nephew Henry, later King Henry VII) still resisted the Yorkists. After a siege, the strongly fortified castle surrendered and in 1468, William became Earl of Pembroke.

As well as his military success, William expanded Raglan Castle with a second courtyard and the great gatehouse, also remodelling Fountain Court to make it worthy of receiving noble guests. There would have been a deer park, fish ponds and extensive orchards to add to the charm in a practical way.

Fountain Court (photo by Alan Santillo)

However, a disagreement in 1469 with Lord Warwick (known as 'the Kingmaker') had disastrous consequences. Lord Warwick at that time was in rebellion against King Edward IV (1442-83, reign from 1461) and defeated him in the Battle of Edgecote Moor. Subsequently, William and his brother Richard were taken prisoner and executed by the Lancastrians. William was buried at Tintern Abbey.

He was succeeded by his son William (c.1451-1491), who in 1479 was forced by King Edward IV to surrender the earldom (which was merged into the Crown), along with its accompanying Welsh lands, to Edward's son, the future King Edward V. The Herbert family influence thus diminished in Wales.

William married Mary Woodville, sister of the queen consort, Elizabeth Woodville, and they had one daughter named Elizabeth (c.1476-1507). After her father's death, Elizabeth inherited extensive lands in Wales, including Raglan Castle.

After the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, the Welsh Tudor family had taken power in the person of King Henry VII. The Herbert family had been kind to young Henry Tudor at Raglan when he was a boy and when he became king, he repaid their kindness by arranging a marriage for Elizabeth to Charles Somerset (c.1460-1526), the illegitimate son of a prominent Lancastrian. Charles was politically very successful and was made the Earl of Worcester.

The Somerset family was flourishing, owning Chepstow Castle as well as Raglan Castle, two key castles in the region. Their wealth and prestige continued to grow and although Charles's son Henry (c.1496-1549) died not long after inheriting Raglan, he still managed to help with castle improvements by using reclaimed lead from Tintern Abbey, during the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

Henry's eldest son, William (c.1526-1589), continued to upgrade the castle, by rebuilding much of the pitched stone court and also rebuilding the hall with a fine roof and an impressive window. He added an elegant long gallery, which looked out over an artificial lake and splendid gardens in the new Renaissance style, thus creating a fortress-palace style of building.

The pitched stone court (photo by Alan Santillo)

Unfortunately, the English Civil War that broke out in 1642 eventually saw the demise of Raglan Castle. The elderly Henry Somerset (c.1577-1646) made considerable fortifications and huge monetary contributions to the Royalist cause, but by 1646 the castle was under siege from Parliamentarian forces led by Sir Thomas Fairfax (1612-71).

After 11 weeks, Henry Somerset knew his cause was futile and surrendered – at least with the honour of Raglan castle being the last castle to fall in Wales. He was arrested and sent to Windsor Castle, where he died. Fairfax ordered the castle to be completely destroyed, but the building was very strong and proved impossible to completely demolish. It was therefore slighted so it could never be used as a military base again.

When Charles II was restored to power in 1660, the Somerset family regained their estates. However, the family was by then heavily in debt and Raglan Castle had been damaged beyond repair. The family relocated to Badminton House in Gloucestershire, while the castle gradually turned from a demolition site, often plundered for its stone and timber, to an ivy-covered ruin.

In 1756, under the ownership of forward-looking Henry Somerset (1744-1803), the castle first became a tourist attraction. In 1938, it was handed over to the Commissioner of Works and today is administered by Cadw. Speaking of today, my fingers were still semi-frozen on and off, but we continued with a really good exploration around the site, climbing and clambering with care appropriate to our somewhat advanced age!

As well as some fascinating exhibits and artefacts, there was a lot of detailed carving on windows and at the top of towers. The hall was particularly impressive, with an oriel window frame that was in an unusually good condition. From the cellar to the Great Tower, there was so much that needed further exploration. Different angles of the castle offered many a potentially good photo – if only the sky had been at least partly blue.

A higher elevation (photo by Alan Santillo)

From a higher position, there were some wonderful views of the surrounding countryside, so that it was easy to imagine the deer park and all the comings and goings of a late-medieval fortress-palace over the centuries. Some other hardy visitors were looking around with interest and didn't seem to be too bothered by the cold, so perhaps it was my somewhat advanced age! However, we decided it was time to bid a slightly frustrated farewell – but we'll be back 😊

Semi-frozen posing (photo by Alan Santillo)