# SKENFRITH CASTLE

Skenfrith, near Abergavenny, Monmouthshire, Wales NP7 8UH

***25th May 2024***

Skenfrith Castle is one of the Three Castles of Gwent, along with Grosmont Castle and White Castle. Its remains in the village of Skenfrith in Monmouthshire consist of well-preserved walls around a circular keep, originally built on an earth mound. Like many castles its origins date from the 11th century, after the Norman invasion. Its Welsh name is Ynysgynwraidd, but perhaps we won't pursue that…

**Approach to the entrance** (photo by Alan Santillo)

It was a very bright day and a Bank Holiday weekend when we visited Skenfrith Castle. This led to two results, namely difficulty taking photos and a large group of people sitting around and drying off after a swim in the nearby River Monnow.

The Three Castles of Gwent were built in the open countryside of Monmouthshire, where there is a gap in the natural defences of the southern Welsh border. This gap is created by the valley of the River Monnow, lying between the river cliffs of the Wye Valley south of Monmouth and the hills around Abergavenny. The castles' aim was to protect communication routes between Herefordshire and Wales.

Soon after the Battle of Hastings in 1066, William the Conqueror (reign 1066-87) enlisted the aid of William FitzOsbern, Lord of Breteuil, who was a relative of his and a close counsellor. FitzOsbern was created Earl of Hereford in 1067 and is one of William the Conqueror's few companions known to have fought at the battle.

FitzOsbern built castles at Monmouth and Chepstow, at either end of the river cliffs of the lower River Wye, so that from these strongholds the central and eastern areas of Monmouthshire could be subdued – this included the later lordship of the Three Castles. It's uncertain if Skenfrith, Grosmont and White castles were raised on the orders of King William or William FitzOsbern, but they would have been built of earth and timber, with a keep and motte protected by a palisade and ditch.

William FitzOsbern died in battle at Cassel in Flanders in 1071 and four years later, his son, Roger de Breteuil, rebelled against King William, resulting in the forfeit of his lands. The later Marcher lordships of Chepstow and Monmouth thus passed to the Crown, the Welsh Marches being the border lands between England and Wales.

After the rebellion, the Crown must have been uneasy about such a large section of important territory belonging to one earl, as much of it was slowly broken up and granted to various people piecemeal, always with the overriding aim of maintaining Anglo-Norman control over the Welsh people.

When King Henry I (reign 1100-35) died, a major Welsh revolt arose against the Normans on the southern Marches and because of this, King Stephen (reign 1135-54) reunited Skenfrith Castle with Grosmont Castle and White Castle, to form a lordship known as the Three Castles, which remained in the control of the Crown.

In 1182, in retaliation for an attack from the Norman de Braose and de Mortimer Marcher families, who took over more lands in west Wales, the Welsh attacked Abergavenny Castle. They did a very thorough job, burning everything except the keep and also killing the sheriff of Dingestow, which is located between Skenfrith and Monmouth, where he was building an earthwork castle.

Following this Welsh uprising, preparations were made at Skenfrith and Grosmont castles against an attack. A royal official, Ralph of Grosmont, supervised building work for King Henry II (reign 1154-89) at Hereford and the Three Castles. He was given an 'official horse' for travel – his unofficial horse must have felt redundant.

At the end of the 12th century, the more significant castles in the southern Marches had a stone hall or keep added to their defences, to act as a central strongpoint. In 1186, it was Skenfrith's turn, where records confirm that Ralph of Grosmont spent £43 17s 7d, with more work the following year repairing the palisades.

In 1190, work began on the castle bailey. Excavation has revealed a defensive ditch and a 12th-century stone wall. A Norman 'capital' built of red sandstone with scalloped decoration was found, indicating good quality building – a 'capital' was at the top of a column to mediate between the column and the load above it.

**The 13th-century round keep**

In 1201, King John (reign 1199-1216) gave the Three Castles' lordship to Hubert de Burgh, a minor landowner from Norfolk, who had become the king's household chamberlain while John was still a prince. By the time John inherited the throne, Hubert had progressed to become a royal official of considerable standing.

The current Skenfrith Castle, unfortunately in ruins, is the one created by de Burgh in the early 13th century, with the main structure being the round keep (above). Although Hubert set about improving his strongholds, his priority possibly being domestic accommodation, it took a while to complete. By 1203 he was away serving the king in western France, where he was captured. While imprisoned, King John granted his lordship of the Three Castles to William de Braose, one of Hubert's rivals. King John was understandably not known for his diplomacy.

By 1207, however, de Braose had also fallen from favour and was dispossessed of his lands. In due course, the vindictive King John was forced to face some deserved comeuppance during the First Barons' War, but de Braose's son, also named William, took advantage of the ensuing chaos to retake the castles.

It must have been a period of great mistrust and mayhem, but by 1215 when King John was forced by his barons to grant the Magna Carta (Great Charter), Hubert de Burgh had managed to regain his power and was appointed royal justiciar, which was more or less the king's administrative deputy, or first minister. However, it took until January 1219, when King Henry III (reign 1216-72) was on the throne, for Hubert to recover the Three Castles from the de Braose heirs.

He is known to have visited the Three Castles at least three times between 1220 and 1222, probably supervising the start of new building work at Skenfrith and Grosmont. Both castles were rebuilt in masonry with durable red sandstone, quarried nearby and due to his wide experience of contemporary advances in military architecture, he was able to modernise his own castles accordingly.

Skenfrith's low-lying position on the floodplain of the River Monnow called for total alteration. The earthworks of the 11th-century Norman castle were levelled and spread out over the current site, to a depth of 12 feet/3.7 metres. This included the ditch being filled in and the 12th-century stone hall or keep being demolished. Hubert de Burgh then set about building a new castle in an irregular rectangular shape, with a circular tower at each corner. The circular keep was built in the centre, with a hall and range of domestic apartments on its west side.

Hubert de Burgh's success, power and influence with the young king continued, the benefits of which included being handed the castles of Carmarthen and Cardigan. These glory days were not to last, however, as his influential position was eroded both by the failure of an expedition against the Welsh and also by the rivalry of the very influential Bishop of Winchester, Peter de Roches (aka Petrus de Rupibus in Latin), a native of north-central France with a pleasing name.

Hubert's fall from grace lost him his royal justiciar position, as well as his lands and castles. Richard Marshal (son of the esteemed knight William Marshal) took his side against the king, who with an army marched against Richard's castle at Usk and besieged it. However, Richard made a successful surprise attack on the king's army encamped outside the walls of Grosmont Castle and the king retreated in haste to Gloucester. The rise and fall of those in power seems very volatile.

The Bishop of Winchester in turn fell from grace, resulting in Hubert's reconciliation with the king in May 1234. The Three Castles were at first withheld from him and placed under the command of Walerund Teutonicus (a masterful name), a German royal servant who controlled several of the castles in South Wales.

Hubert's castles were later restored to him, but in 1236 he was in trouble again, this time over the marriage of his daughter Megotta (another memorable name) to the young Richard de Clare, Earl of Gloucester. Richard was a minor and in the king's wardship, but the marriage had gone ahead without a royal licence and Hubert once more had to surrender the castles. By 1243 he had presumably had enough and died. Walerund Teutonicus returned as the castles' constable and at Skenfrith, he built a chapel and roofed the round keep, known as the 'king's tower'.

**The 'king's tower' from the hall range** (photo by Alan Santillo)

In 1254, the Three Castles were granted to King Henry III's eldest son, later King Edward I. Stewards' accounts for 1256-7 state there was revenue from market, mill, pigs foraging in the woods and eels caught in the River Monnow. Outgoings included routine expenses on the estate, the making of wooden ploughs, iron for ploughshares, wheels for wagons and carts, plus the thatching of farm buildings.

Employees included carters, a smith, ploughmen, 300 harvesters, harrowers (to break up soil and cover seeds) and a man to keep birds out of the corn in the summer. Reeves were also employed on outlying manors – a reeve being an early form of manager who oversaw serfs and peasants, as well as being responsible for many aspects of finances. The Three Castles were thriving.

The next decade saw an increased threat from the Welsh with the rise of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd (c.1223-82), also known as Llywelyn the Last, Prince of Gwynedd. In 1260, a new constable, Gilbert Talbot, was given command of the Three Castles.

Two years later, Llywelyn was planning an attack on Abergavenny and the Welsh tenants of the border lordships gave him their support. In response, the constables of Monmouth Castle and the Three Castles were given orders to garrison them at any cost. The attack on Abergavenny failed, although it was successful in that Llywelyn ap Gruffydd was formally recognised as Prince of Wales.

In 1267, the Three Castles were granted to Edmund, second surviving son of King Henry III, known as Edmund Crouchback (1245-96). This nickname is because of the stitched cross he wore on his back when taking part in the Holy Land Crusades of 1271-2, but Crossback morphing into Crouchback doesn't seem to make sense?

Edmund's older brother, King Edward I (reign 1272-1307) oversaw the conquest of independent Wales, with the consequent death of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd in 1282 causing the Marcher castles to lose much of their military roles. Meanwhile, Edmund died in 1296 and in 1310, his son Henry's son Henry (i.e. his grandson), was born in Grosmont Castle and was known inevitably as Henry of Grosmont.

By 1330, Henry the elder was blind and decided to devote his life to religion. He had given his properties to Henry of Grosmont, who was made Duke of Lancaster in 1351. When he died in 1361, his property was divided between his two daughters, Maude and Blanche. When Maude died, Blanche inherited the Three Castles and in 1364, her husband, John of Gaunt, was made Duke of Lancaster.

Their son was Henry of Bolingbroke, who became King Henry IV (reign 1399-1413). The Three Castles were royal again, but by then were deemed insignificant. Their main functions were local centres of administration, revenue collection and estate management. Royal accounts show that repairs were kept up, but no longer to that of a high-ranking household, or a border castle fit for significant defence.

Little further work took place at Skenfrith, although in the reign of King Henry VI (1422-61), repairs were carried out to the round keep, gatehouse and watergate. Despite a history of many Anglo-Welsh conflicts in the area, Skenfrith Castle was never attacked and by 1538, had fallen into disuse and subsequent ruin. By 1613, all of the Three Castles were described as ruinous and decayed.

In 1825, the Duchy of Lancaster sold the Three Castles to Henry Somerset, 9th Duke of Beaufort and in 1902, they were split when the Beaufort estate sold them separately. Skenfrith Castle had several owners before being acquired by Harold Sands, who carried out conservation before donating it to the National Trust. It is now maintained by Cadw, protected under UK law as a Grade II* listed building.

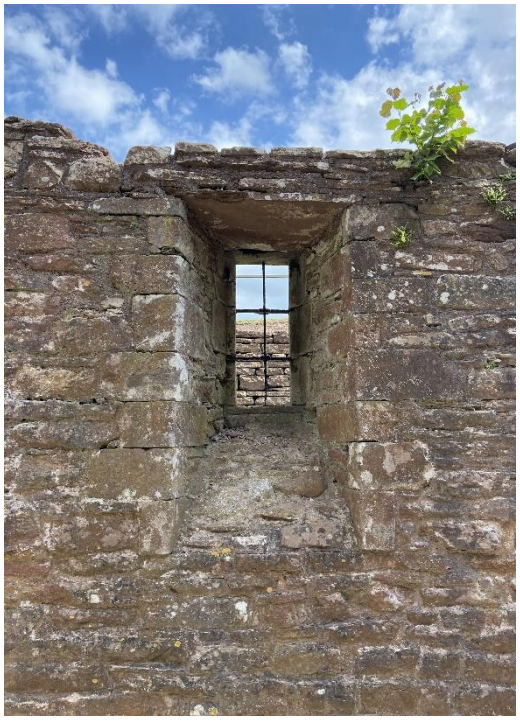
**The hall range** (photo by Alan Santillo)

The history sussed, it was time to walk around the ruins and the hall range down below the round keep looked particularly interesting. It seemed incredible that until archaeological excavations of 1954, it was thought that no internal buildings of the castle survived except the admittedly in-your-face round keep.

The south end of the hall range had a water tank, although water ingress seemed to have been a problem.  Originally two storeys, the ground floor had been prone to winter flooding and although probably only intended as part-basements, it was later filled in with gravel. The range as a whole consisted of three rooms, although the central and northern rooms had firstly been one. At the northern end, later foundations on the right indicate that there was once another room inside the north curtain, forming an L-shaped block. Since this room adjoins the domestic buildings and faces east-west, it could well have housed the castle chapel, as one is known to have been built in 1244 – such a pity the chapel has disappeared.

**Foundations of the hall range**

Today the northern room was accessible via some steps and a ramped path that led down past a small medieval window, which was complete with its medieval iron bars. The big structures are impressive, but I love the smaller details too.



**Medieval iron window bars**

Still in the hall range, there was rather an impressive doorway for what is a largely ruinous castle, built with dressed ashlar stonework. Ashlar is cut and dressed stone, worked using a chisel to achieve a form that is usually rectangular in shape. In fact, all the openings in the keep and towers at Skenfrith Castle would have had stonework of this quality, but it has been taken away and used elsewhere. There are apparently masons marks on some of the dressed stones, but I failed to notice any. This would be rectified on a future visit!

**A doorway within the hall range**

The ground-floor range would originally have been a basement for the hall range at first-floor level, but the only clue to the hall's layout is the lower room's fireplace, since the hall's fireplace would have been directly above. If the fireplace had been in the centre of the hall, as was common practice, and between two windows, there would have been enough room for a square chamber at the northern end of the block. I so often wish time travel could be possible.

There was a kitchen block across the courtyard on the opposite side of the hall range, between the south-east tower and the steps to the watergate. Nothing now survives above ground, but excavation revealed two long narrow buildings, each with internal hearths for cooking and a large circular oven at one end, which would have been used for cooking meat or baking bread. Part of another circular oven with a rake pit for ashes survives built into the curtain wall by the kitchen site.

Having investigated the hall range, the large round keep in the centre of the castle seemed to be drawing us like a magnet. The earth mound around its base was once thought to be the remains of a previous castle motte, but it was heaped up around the keep when built in around 1230. Its internal diameter is 21 feet/6.4 metres, with three floors consisting of a basement and two upper storeys.

The external base of the keep slopes more thickly outward in order to strengthen it against attack, with a line of roll moulding above. The tower face above this still has some areas of white plaster, with which it was originally rendered, although I failed to notice this. I couldn't help noticing the ground-floor entrance, though, which had been (badly) cut through the walling directly below the original doorway that would have been reached by an external stairway.

**Inside the circular keep**

Standing inside the keep at Skenfrith Castle with its jagged entrance, the strong light continued to be somewhat of a photographic problem, although the ground floor itself was only lit by two narrow openings. The first-floor chamber possessed two semi-circular windows, with no fire and no stairs down to the ground floor, access to which had probably been via a trapdoor in the floor. Basic amenities!

From the outside, a semicircular bulge outward was a common feature of the round castle keeps of the southern Marches, indicating the location of a stair or latrine. At Skenfrith, a circular newel stair went from the first floor to the second floor and then up on to the roof, which in the 13th century probably consisted of a circular timber fighting top (hourd), with all-round arrow loops.

**Bulge to the left!**

The upper chamber of the keep was the 5-star accommodation of the day, with a large hooded fireplace, two windows and a private latrine corbelled out over the tower face (maybe not so 5-star after all). This room was no doubt for a high-ranking person, with facilities of a bedroom and sitting room for the likes of Hubert de Burgh and his family. The first-floor room below would have acted as an antechamber to the more private accommodation above it.

The castle's curtain wall has survived up to a height of 16.4 feet/5 metres, very probably originally topped by a parapet with a battlement and protective timber hoarding. A significant amount of the wall remains to impress, built with the Devonian Old Red Sandstone common to the area and with semicircular towers on each corner, all with an outer diameter of around 24.6 feet/7.5 metres.

Three of the four towers are surviving, with the exception of the north-west one, all of them built very similarly with a deep, circular basement. There were two floors above the basement, with arrow loops to protect the adjacent curtain wall and the ground in front of the tower. The towers possessed no fireplaces or latrines, which suggests they had a purely military function.

Their entrances were placed at a height of 5.9 feet/1.8 metres to 8.2 feet/2.5 metres, presumably reached via a wooden stair. Since there were no stairs down to the basement, access must have been using a ladder and trapdoor. It seems likely the basements were prone to winter flooding and used solely for storage.

The south-east tower, similar to the north-east one, had an entrance well above ground level and must have been accessed by a wooden stair. A partially blocked opening to the tower's left may have led to a latrine in the angle between curtain wall and tower, while the arch to the right may have been a sally port or postern.

**The south-east corner tower** (photo by Alan Santillo)

Archaeological excavation in the 1950s confirmed that the outer castle walls were surrounded by a stone-revetted moat fed by the River Monnow, now grassed over (a revetment being a facing of impact-resistant material). On the east, the river flows outside the curtain wall, with a water gate built in the wall's centre.

**Steps to the watergate** (photo by Alan Santillo)

The watergate was certainly a very noticeable feature, not only because it was being used by the current-day swimmers still at the castle, who had towels drying along the wall. Overlooking this, the fact that the castle was so close to strategic crossing points on the river obviously proved advantageous for transport of people and supplies. In fact, riverbank repairs upstream in 2003 uncovered remains of walls from a large medieval wharf, the size of which would have allowed barges to unload, suggesting the river was deeper and easily navigable in medieval times.

Having explored most of the inside, we decided to walk around the outside, where the scale of the curtain wall seemed even more imposing. The river was indeed close to the castle, though obviously a lot shallower than in medieval times.

**Outside the curtain wall (north-east tower)**

What I eventually realised was that on first entering the castle, we had climbed some modern wooden steps through what looked like a ruined gap in the northern curtain wall. This was the site of the gatehouse, which in Skenfrith's case had been a large, simple round-headed arch situated above ground level and reached across the substantial moat by a bridge and drawbridge (and presumably protected by a portcullis). A drawing made in the 1730s shows that part of the arch had already fallen, making it highly likely that the remainder of it would have succumbed fairly soon after. Unfortunately, lighting conditions for taking a photo of the gatehouse site were extremely difficult, so a future visit seems even more necessary.

**Site of the gatehouse** (photo by Alan Santillo)

At this point, we decided to return to the car parked nearby to eat our packed lunch, as the area near the watergate was still occupied by the group of swimmers. After a while, we were unashamedly pleased to see the group returning to their cars and hightailed it back inside the grounds to investigate in peace. There was a circular structure in a dip of ground that I had first assumed to be a well, but it seems it was the remains of the circular oven used for cooking meat or baking bread. It seemed sturdy, I suppose it had to be heavy-duty and fit for purpose.

**The oven remains** (photo by Alan Santillo)

I'd found Skenfrith Castle's low-lying position rather odd, but since that position was at a strategic place on the river that had been used for transportation of goods and people, it made sense to need a fortification there. I was very glad I'd previously purchased a Cadw guide book for the Three Castles, because otherwise the information was somewhat scant. What I would really have loved is an audio guide we could have downloaded, although in many ways visiting a castle relies on a certain amount of imagination anyway. If only the walls could talk…

**If only the walls could talk** (photo by Alan Santillo)