

SNODHILL CASTLE

The Green, Snodhill, Nr Dorstone, Herefordshire HR3 6BG

24th May 2024

There was quite a lot of heavy cloud cover and the threat of rain the day we visited this previously unheard of castle. It was very much a ruin, but I didn't care, because I totally loved the name. The journey there took us along some very narrow roads that were frankly not for the faint-hearted, but a lifetime of Devon and Cornwall country roads had inured us to the squeeze factor and we arrived safely at somewhere that appeared to lie between farmland and woodland. We'd taken our own coffee, so fortified ourselves for the unknown.

It turned out to be much more straightforward than I'd imagined, as not far from where we parked was the entrance to the castle (or I should say castle ruins) through a gate. Attached to the gate were some double-A4 paper guides on offer for £1 in the honesty box, so we were honest and paid for one. It was excellent and compiled by the Snodhill Castle Preservation Trust, which had been set up in 2016 with the support of Historic England, plus other donors and benefactors.

Not only that, but Professor Alice Roberts and the *Digging for Britain* team had been there on 5th July 2023 to check out progress on the 2023 excavation work on the chapel and postern gate. The television programme was apparently aired on 11th January 2024 and we missed it! How did this happen? Good weather last year had helped the archaeologists to reveal five courses of fine stonework at the postern gate that had previously been unknown, as well as the layout of the chapel. A silver longcross coin, possibly of King Henry III, was also discovered – but I'm jumping ahead of myself, so back to the entrance gate.



Inside the entrance gate (photo by Alan Santillo)

Labelled 'Britain's newest, oldest castle', it had nearly been left to rot and until 2017 was impassable and on the verge of collapse, until its rescue began. 'Snod Hill' rises almost 230 feet/70 metres above the Golden Valley, about 1 mile/1.6 kilometres south of Dorstone in West Herefordshire. The ruined motte and bailey castle is recognised as one of the major castles of the Welsh Marches, built in the 11th century between newly Norman England and the land of the Welsh Princes.

A notice had greeted us as we entered through the gate, advising us of either a very steep climb straight up to the castle, or a more gentle path around the site to the top. We chose the easier option, which actually gave us a much better idea of the land surrounding the castle and where it stood in relation to its outer edges. It may have been termed the easier route, but as we'd been warned, the paths were uneven and bumpy, with tree roots, stumps and badger holes. Kudos to the people who cleared the site, it must have been hell to begin with.



Easy approach to Snodhill Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

The original castle was built in 1068, by order of William FitzOsbern, 1st Earl of Hereford, who became one of the great nobles of Norman England and was a companion and counsellor of William the Conqueror. Snodhill Castle was one of nearly 400 castles built to secure the Welsh border, there being seven castles in the Golden Valley alone. It's thought that rather than initially being built in timber, this castle was built straight away in stone, as FitzOsbern was known to have had other early stone castles built, such as Chepstow, Monmouth and Wigmore.

Snodhill Castle was then granted to Hugh L'Asne, a close supporter of FitzOsbern, after which it passed by marriage to Robert de Chandos. His descendants, who were barons and sheriffs of Hereford, held and developed the castle for over 300 years until the 15th century. In 1401, King Henry IV gave orders to John Chandos to refortify the castle against Owain Glyndŵr's burgeoning Welsh rebellion.

Chandos took action by building a huge tower in the castle bailey, known as the north keep. When its circumference had been uncovered in 2019, its dimensions (49 feet/15 metres by 43 feet/13 metres, with walls 10-13 feet/3-4 metres thick) revealed an extremely strong and large structure. This may well have contributed to Snodhill Castle surviving Glyndŵr's attacks on Herefordshire.

Chandos died in 1428 with no heir, his property being inherited by the Beauchamp family, relatives of his widow. There's no doubt that Snodhill Castle was in a prime location for various uprisings and it seems that two successive constables of the castle were killed during the Wars of the Roses (1455-87). At this time, Richard Neville (known as 'the kingmaker') briefly held it, then it passed to Richard of York (later King Richard III) and thereafter to the Crown. When it came into the possession of Queen Elizabeth I, she gifted it to her champion, Robert Dudley.

In 1568, Robert sold it to the Vaughan family, by which time it had a 12-acre deer park, a 'pleasaunce', an independently defensible north keep (uncovered in 2021) and a Royal Free Chapel (uncovered in 2022 and 2023), the chaplain of which was Robert Fayrfax, a favourite composer of Kings Henry VII and VIII.



The chapel

As the sole royal chapel built within a lordship castle, the Royal Free Chapel of Snodhill is an oddity, since all other royal chapels are built within royal castles. It must have been a castle of some standing, as from at least the 13th century to the 16th century, it had chaplains that were personally appointed by the monarch. It was still in use by 1597, but was demolished and the site lost for over 400 years.

Back to the Vaughans, who were committed Royalists and prepared Snodhill Castle for a siege during the English Civil War. It's unclear what actually happened, although cannon balls have been discovered nearby and recent findings suggest it was still occupied at that time. Ultimately, it's considered very likely that the castle was slighted by Parliamentarians in 1647 to prevent future military use.

In 1657, the impoverished Vaughans sold Snodhill Castle and its lands to William Prosser, who is thought to have set up a thriving coachbuilding business in London. He enlarged the estate at Snodhill, but dismantled the castle and its chapel to use some of its masonry in his newly enlarged Snodhill Court and farm.

The following centuries are unfortunately not well documented, but it remained in private ownership until 2016, when acquired by the Snodhill Castle Preservation Trust, backed by Historic England, to preserve the remaining structure.

As we continued to walk around and up, it felt very much as if the castle was still in the early stages of revealing its secrets and in fact, the Snodhill Castle Preservation Trust information leaflet said: "it's a castle of unfolding puzzles." It was still clear to see that a great deal of effort has already been made to make sense of those mysteries and to make the various castle areas accessible.

We first looked around the remains of the north keep, where it was very easy to imagine how it had once been a strong, imposing structure. It would have been situated near the castle hall and therefore higher than the present remnant, which would have made it both a secure refuge and a formidable deterrent to attackers. Its archaeological rescue had apparently been a delicate process, but the hard work involved now allows access to its interior from the bailey and interestingly, some early 15th-century pottery had been discovered there.



The north keep (photo by Alan Santillo)

We followed the path and the route on the information leaflet (which was proving well worth £1), walking along to the south curtain wall, where above us was some rubble from when a section of the wall had collapsed. At that time, the wall's age had been unknown, but it has since been discovered that it was part of the very early 11th-century stone defence. Repairs to the wall had been carried out, but we still had to take great care on our way up to the inner bailey.

This would have been the central area of the castle and the leaflet tantalisingly informed us that about 3.3 feet/1 metre beneath our feet there would be a great hall, solar, kitchens, bakehouse, granaries, brewery and stables. As it was, we were afforded a good view of the terraces making up the earthworks. One day...

Next we made our way to have a closer look at the chapel, where a small bronze figurine of a saint or knight had been found in 2022. In the far apse wall, there were two recesses – one an ambry (a safe for vestments and sacred vessels) and the other a piscina (a basin in which to wash communion vessels).



The two recesses

Finally, we climbed the now thankfully convenient steps, which had been installed in 2017 with the aid of an EU grant, to the high keep. Its surviving parts are believed to date from around 1160 and in 2019, excavations had excitingly revealed the remains of a spiral staircase. Below it, the foundations of an 11th-century rectangular hall keep were revealed, one of the oldest in the country.



The aptly named high keep

The portcullis slot was still quite visible and well-defined, its base denoting where the original lower floor level would have been. As we stood gazing around us with not another soul in sight, the view from this lofty position was commanding as it was, but it would have been even more advantageous from the now missing storeys above. The site was exuding a powerful sense of history...



The portcullis slot, central bottom half



The high keep (photo by Alan Santillo)

As we made our way down the incline and back to the car, I was very happy we'd made the effort to come and see this exciting, relatively recent discovery. There are several indications – such as window glass, painted wall plaster and medieval artefacts – that this castle possessed high status accommodation suitable for an earl or even a king, which suggests there is more history to unfold 😊