

CARREG CENNEN CASTLE

Trapp, Llandeilo, Carmarthenshire, Wales SA19 6UA

29th July 2012

We were first taken to Carreg Cennen by our son, but I have to confess I didn't have my history head on, as my attention was mainly taken up with our 4½ -year-old granddaughter. That's my excuse! I remember the ruins of an incredibly romantic-looking castle perched on top of a hill and the joy of a young girl as she ran around relishing the freedom of a Welsh hillside that had once witnessed centuries of history, as the site of various battles and bitter conflict.



Carreg Cennen and our granddaughter on a Welsh hill

27th September 2021

Nine years later, Alan and I returned to Carreg Cennen (Caer Cynan in Welsh), eager to investigate more fully – and this time I had my history head on. We ended up driving along a very narrow road, but realised this was to our advantage when the castle appeared in the distance, showing its impressive situation.



Carreg Cennen brooding on top of its mound (photo by Alan Santillo)

After arriving at the car park, there was a short walk up to Castell Farm, where we paid our dues and stopped for coffee in a large threshing barn now converted to tearooms. I remembered being there before, as we sat at a wooden table under wooden ceiling beams that created a potent atmosphere of years gone by.

It was then time to walk up to the castle, along a fairly steep path that gradually offered ever more expansive rural views. Although it was cool veering on cold, the sky had opened to a benevolent blue, as we turned a corner and beheld the castle in full view. Its curtain wall ran downwards to the right and as I walked ever upward, stopping only to take photos, I pondered on the centuries of history.



The north-east aspect, looking quite intimidating

It's very possible that the first stronghold built on Carreg Cennen's limestone crag overlooking the River Cennen was an Iron Age hillfort, as human remains dating back to prehistoric times were found at the site. Roman coins from the first and second century have also been found, although it's considered unlikely that the Romans were there on a permanent basis.

The earliest castle was probably founded in the late 12th century by Rhys ap Gruffydd (c.1132-1197), known as The Lord Rhys. He was the ruler of Deheubarth (the regional name for the realms of southern Wales). Carreg Cennen has been attributed to Rhys ap Gruffydd because of its similarities to his other fortifications at Cardigan and Dinefwr. The family history is an interesting one – and it helps to know that 'ap' means 'son of' in a Welsh name.

Rhys ap Gruffydd's father was Gruffydd ap Rhys (c.1085-c.1137), whose four sons worked together to consolidate and defend their territory. They were Anarawd, Cadell, Maredudd and Rhys, who each took the lead in succession, apparently with no known discord. Their raids took place from West Wales to Glamorgan.

Anarawd was assassinated in 1143 by men from North Wales. Following this, Cadell and his two younger brothers reconquered Ceredigion, a principal area of Wales, making it once again a part of Deheubarth. However, Cadell was badly wounded by Normans from Tenby and was no longer able to take part in events. Maredudd died in 1155, which left Rhys as ruler of the Deheubarth.

Between 1158 and 1165, Rhys was under a lot of pressure from King Henry II. The territories of Ceredigion and Cantref Bychan were restored to their Norman lords, but Rhys retaliated with an attempt on Carmarthen in 1159 and a successful attack on Llandovery in 1162. This indicated to Henry II that an Anglo-Norman presence was not going to be easy, although the political climate was changing.

Ireland had become a magnet for men from West Wales, including the sons and grandsons of Nest, daughter of Rhys ap Tewdwr. It became expedient for Henry II and Rhys to work more harmoniously and while Henry II was alive, Rhys became a trusted agent and ally. He was content to have a good relationship with the king, although he continued to be an independent Welsh prince.



Closer and still a little menacing (photo by Alan Santillo)

Lord Rhys rebuilt Cardigan Castle for his own benefit and used marriage alliances to further his position. However, as the 12th century drew to a close, he was once again embroiled in political struggles and feuds. This discord heralded the decline of his dynasty, although by the time of his death in 1197, he had been the main ruling prince in Wales for more than forty years.

In the 1100s, Carreg Cennen had been the administrative centre of Deheubarth, with the royal seat located at nearby Dinefwr Castle. However, the descendants of Lord Rhys were plagued by family feuds. The first surviving written reference to Carreg Cennen, dated 1248, refers to Matilda de Braose, who was a wealthy English woman married to a descendant of Lord Rhys. She allegedly granted the castle to the English to spite her son, Rhys Fychan.

He was having none of it and seized Carreg Cennen back from the English. For his audacity, he was fined £200 by King Henry III, but retained the castle, despite entering a protracted power struggle with his uncle Maredudd, who was fighting for the reign of the Deheubarth kingdom.

In 1250, the feuding princes of Wales were engulfed in the struggle between the English monarchy and Llywelyn the Great (king of Gwynedd in North Wales and eventually ruler of all Wales). The feuding princes strategically sided with whoever had the upper hand and consequently, the castle changed hands several times.

In 1272, King Edward I came to the English throne and five years later, went to war with Llywelyn ap Gruffydd. He was the grandson of Llywelyn the Great and was Prince of Wales from 1258 to 1282 – but he was also known as Llywelyn the Last. As a consequence of Llywelyn's refusal to pay homage to the English king, Edward's army proceeded to advance and capture Carreg Cennen, installing an English garrison. Repairs were carried out and the castle was granted to John Giffard, commander of the English troops.

In 1287, the castle was again recaptured in the same day as nearby Dinefwr Castle, during an extensive Welsh uprising. The castle was then put under the charge of Humphrey de Bohun, 4th Earl of Hereford. Two years later, though, it was back in the hands of John Giffard and it was either John, or his son John, who built the remodelled castle, the remains of which are left today.



The inner ward towards the north gatehouse

Carreg Cennen was part of a surge of similar fortresses built after the Edwardian conquest by Marcher lords (nobles appointed by England's king to guard the troublesome border lands known as the Welsh Marches between England and Wales). However, the forbidding castle built to John Giffard's command on top of the earlier Welsh stronghold didn't serve as his main residence, but acted more as a symbol of control – and a successful one at that.

The renovated castle consisted of inner and outer wards, both of them more or less rectangular. The inner ward containing all the amenities was built on the summit of the limestone crag, which must have been particularly draughty, especially on a windy day! The only access to the gatehouse of the inner ward was via an angled barbican with two drawbridges over pits below.

Two impressive towers stood at the north-east and north-west corners of the curtain wall – I must admit that standing and looking up at the substantial north-east tower from the outside, it did indeed look daunting. The outer ward stretched to the north and east, affording further protection on the most vulnerable side of the castle and was the site of numerous buildings such as workshops and stables. I tried hard to imagine today's ruins once humming with activity...



The north-east tower

Carreg Cennen belonged to the Giffard family until 1322. John, the second Baron Giffard was one of the leaders of the civil war against King Edward II and the king's 'favourite', chamberlain and nephew-in-law Hugh Despenser the Younger, Lord of Glamorgan. It seems that Edward was infatuated with Hugh, to the extent that he refused to expel him from court, to the cost of his own kingship.

John Giffard was captured at the battle of Boroughbridge, north-west of York, and executed in May 1322. The castle was given to Hugh Despenser, but the times were tumultuous and King Edward II was deposed by his wife, Queen Isabella of France, who had sometimes been described as the She-Wolf of France.

She had become no longer able to tolerate Edward's unstable and controversial behaviour, which led her to perceive that her marriage to him was unviable. In desperation, she turned to Roger Mortimer, Edward and Hugh's greatest enemy, for help in ridding herself of Hugh Despenser.

Hugh was captured in South Wales on 16th November 1326, along with the king and some others. While Edward was treated with dignity and respect, Hugh experienced the opposite. He was tied to a horse and forced to carry his coat of arms upside down to show his disgrace. Biblical verses were drawn on his skin, he was forced to wear a crown of nettles and trumpets were blown in his ears.

When he arrived in the public square at Hereford, he was given a mock trial in front of Queen Isabella, King Edward II's half-brothers and some other unlucky people. Having been found guilty of a long list of offences (some of which were true, others partly true and some totally ridiculous), he was tied to four horses and dragged through the streets of Hereford. Here he was hanged, drawn and quartered – which was a truly gruesome fate, despite the crime.



West curtain wall (left) & north facing rooms (photo by Alan Santillo)

After this, Carreg Cennen passed through the hands of several owners, before becoming the property of John of Gaunt in 1362 and thus incorporated into the Duchy of Lancaster. It was in turn passed to John's son, Henry Bolingbroke, who became King Henry IV in 1399. As Crown property, it became a target for attacks during the Welsh rebellion of Owain Glyndŵr.

Owain and his commanders, the wonderfully named Rhys the Fierce and Rhys Ddu the Black, captured several castles in the area before the inevitable happened in 1403 and it was Carreg Cennen's turn. Although an initial attack from 800 Welsh opponents was repulsed, the castle then suffered a siege that lasted for several months until it was ultimately forced to surrender. Records show that serious damage led to repairs between 1414 to 1421.

Despite Owain Glyndŵr's success, the tide began to turn by 1407, as England's much larger and better equipped forces began to overwhelm the Welsh. By 1409, they had reconquered most of Wales, leading to Owain's retreat.

King Henry IV died in 1413, followed two years later by Owain Glyndŵr. However, remnants of Owain's army later rebelled against the repressive taxes and laws enforced by the English. They fought the English bitterly from mountain and castle strongholds, including Carreg Cennen, which they had captured.

The rebellion failed and in 1455, the Welsh landowner Gruffydd ap Nicolas took advantage of what was basically a power vacuum in South Wales, where many royal offices were being held by absentee officials. Gruffydd seized Carreg Cennen, but then came into conflict the following year with Edmund Tudor, 1st Earl of Richmond and half-brother to King Henry VI.

Edmund Tudor gained control of the castle, but died of the plague later that year. The job of maintaining royal authority in South Wales then passed to his brother, Jasper Tudor, Duke of Bedford and Earl of Pembroke. At around this time, Gruffydd ap Nicolas had instigated some necessary repairs and modernisations, including musket loop holes that were adapted to the use of firearms.



A musket loop hole

In 1459, the Wars of the Roses began. This was a series of civil wars fought to gain control of the English throne in the mid-late 15th century, between supporters of two rival branches of the House of Plantagenet – Lancaster and York. Carreg Cennen was garrisoned by Team Lancaster for the Lancastrian dynasty of King Henry VI, supported by Jasper, with Gruffyd ap Nicolas as commander. The size of the garrison is unknown and the castle seems not to have seen any fighting – possibly because attackers would have been put off by its strong defences and its isolated location, a long way from the main areas of conflict.

However, events elsewhere brought about the fate of Carreg Cennen, when the Battle of Mortimor's Cross was fought in February 1461 not far from the Welsh border. The opposing forces consisted of an army led by Jasper Tudor and his father Owen Tudor, plus others loyal to the Lancastrian cause, against the army of the Yorkists led by Edward, Earl of March (later King Edward IV).

At Mortimor's Cross, the Yorkists were victorious, with King Henry VI and his supporters forced to take refuge in Scotland. Later that year, Edward assigned the task of subduing Wales to some of his trusted supporters, including William Herbert, 1st Earl of Pembroke. As well as being a Welsh nobleman, he was a soldier, politician and courtier, sometimes known as 'Black William'.

By the end of 1461, the Lancastrian army was defeated and Gruffyd's sons, Thomas and Owain, took refuge in Carreg Cennen, along with a number of other supporters. The Yorkists had conquered nearly all of Wales (with the main exception of Harlech) and Jasper Tudor had fled overseas, leaving Carreg Cennen the last remaining Lancastrian fortress in the south.

In the spring of 1462, William Herbert instructed his half-brother, Sir Richard Herbert and Sir Roger Vaughan, a member of the gentry, to take control of the castle. They set off from Raglan Castle with a group of 200 gentlemen and yeomen, heading for Carreg Cennen. The futility of the Lancastrian cause must have prompted Thomas and Owain ap Gruffydd to surrender, after which they were pardoned in return for pledging allegiance to King Edward IV.

A small garrison was installed, but a short while later, the king issued orders for the castle's destruction. It was a most unusual decision, since no other castle was slighted by royal command at that time. It may have been because of its potential as a commanding fortress in an area with Lancastrian sympathies. Having to pay the garrison may also have been an issue, or the general unease about local law and order. Whatever the reason, it was curtains for Carreg Cennen. William Herbert thus set about destroying the castle, recruiting a labour force of 500 men, who used a variety of tools to render the once formidable fortress uninhabitable.



Destruction of Carreg Cennen

After the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, King Henry VII gave the castle ruins and land to Rhys ap Thomas, a Welsh soldier who was one of his faithful supporters. Rhys was instrumental in the battle's victory, with some sources even claiming that he had dealt the death blow to King Richard III on the battlefield.

In due course, Carreg Cennen was passed on to the Vaughan family of Golden Grove in Carmarthenshire, who in turn left it to the Cawdor family in the early 19th century. The Earl of Cawdor restored parts of it according to the fashionable ideal of the time for romantic ruins. It became famous for this and was repeatedly sketched by Turner. In 1932, it was placed under the care of the Office of Works, although the Cawdors held the castle until well into the 20th century.

In the 1960s, it became the property of the Morris family of Castell Farm, when Lord Cawdor's legal team mistakenly worded the deeds to include the castle with the rest of the farmland. Quite an error! The castle remains privately owned, but maintained by CADW, a division of the Welsh government dedicated to protecting historical buildings, who have stabilised and restored some of the remains.

This castle ruin slumbering on a Welsh hillside certainly has a significant history. As I stood taking photos, I noticed a few visitors descending a steep set of steps down past a postern gate, situated in the south-east corner of the inner ward and remembered that on our first visit we were given a torch at the castle entrance, so we could venture down into a long passage that led to a damp limestone cave. As we'd travelled deeper inside, the darkness had intensified.



Down into the depths

The cave was most probably incorporated into the castle's defences in the early 14th century, during the building of the outer ward. The passage ends in a small chamber where a natural rock basin is filled with dripping water from above. A freshwater spring also rises in the cave, which would have been a useful supplement to the water supply in dry weather. This spring may have been the reason for the passage in the first place, although the north ditch of the castle was specifically designed to catch rainwater for drinking.



The natural basin

In the mid-19th century, four Roman coins from the mid-fourth century had been discovered in the debris below the mouth of the cave, along with a spindle whorl. Then later in the early 20th century, bones of two adults and a child, as well as a perforated horse tooth, were located within the stalagmite deposits in the cave. Even later in 1980, three human teeth were found.

The existence of the cave certainly adds intrigue to the remains of this remarkable castle and indeed, Carreg Cennen is one of the few castles in Britain to possess such an unusual natural phenomenon. I rather wish I'd taken more photos in that first visit, but the two above give a good indication of its qualities.

The weather was slightly capricious as we explored all the nooks and crannies of this once proud castle. It was easy to imagine earlier occupants looking out at the weather systems sweeping across the expanses of land below. There's no doubt the location of Carreg Cennen was clearly used to great effect, with walls right up to the edge of the cliffs to the south and ditches to the west.

The east wall of the inner court was very interesting, where a range of apartments would have included a hall. On the first floor was a kitchen, the upper floor of the hall and the solar, or 'king's chamber'. A solar was a room of comfort or status used for private living and sleeping arrangements, which usually included a fireplace and often tapestries or wall hangings.

The solar at Carreg Cennen has a carved stone fireplace and traceried windows (tracery being the architectural way the windows are divided into sections of varying proportions). One window faces into the courtyard, while the other faces outwards onto impressive views to the south – a solar with a view. These windows are believed to date from the late 13th or early 14th centuries.

On the second floor was the chapel and the chapel tower extending outwards. If we return to Carreg Cennen, this area of the castle is one I need to investigate more fully, as for some reason photographic evidence seems to be lacking – and also my memory is annoyingly vague...



Part of the east side buildings (photo by Alan Santillo)

However, I paid greater attention to several of the arrow slits in the north-west tower and the views they afforded over the land below. I also admired very much the wonderful stonework of the walls and the detail of their construction.



Inside the north-west tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

The remains of two substantial baking ovens were also clear to see and as we stood there in the rapidly cooling air, it was a pleasant thought to imagine how that part of the castle must have been sought after for its warmth, not to mention its contents, by castle occupants during autumn and winter days.



Probably once in almost constant use

Although reluctant to leave, gathering rain clouds and the fact that my hands had become really cold, we left the inner ward and walked out through the gatehouse and barbican, via wooden walkways covering deep pits, which had originally been traps meant for attackers. Once in the outer ward that had once enclosed stables, workshops and lime kilns, we spotted the remains of the latter.



The lime kilns (photo by Alan Santillo)

During medieval times, when buildings such as cathedrals, abbeys and castles were being built, lime kilns were constructed on site in order to produce mortar for building purposes. The kilns at Carreg Cennen, constructed on the bumpy land, must have been worth their weight in gold at the time – or lime, as it happened.

As we retraced our steps back down towards Castell Farm, I was aware how it was still very much a working hill farm, with many of the buildings having retained their agricultural purpose and sheep keeping the grazing pastures as they should be. The farm is known for its unusual and rare breeds of cows and sheep (which is also the way it should be) and its horses.

I was so glad to have returned to Carreg Cennen and while writing this account, have been constantly surprised at the richness and importance of its unique history. From a visitor's perspective, it is well worth the climb.



Photo by Alan Santillo