

DINEFWR CASTLE

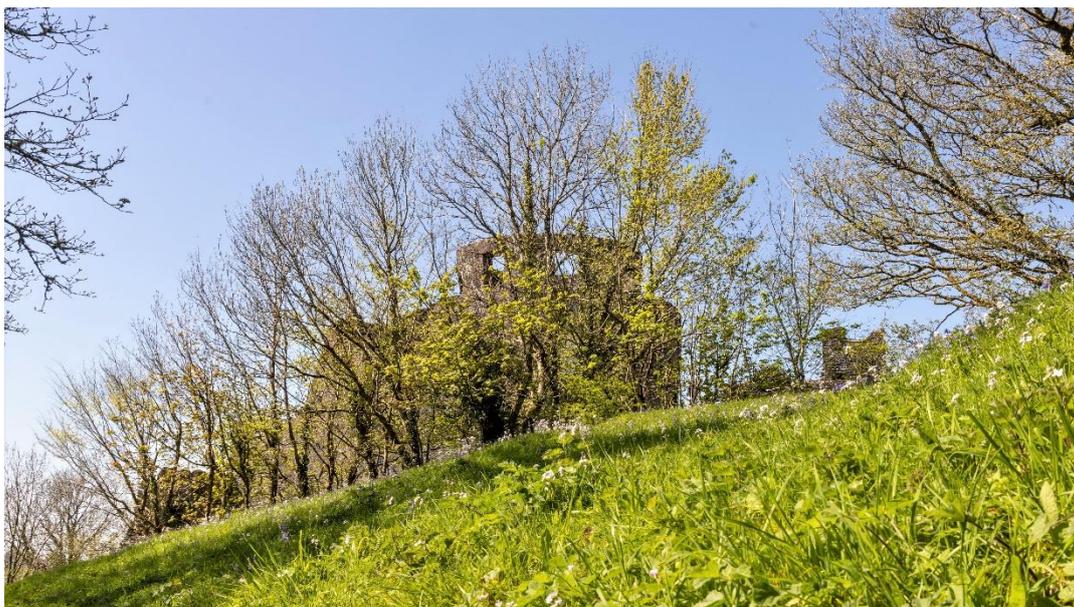
Carmarthen Road, Llandeilo, Wales SA19 6RT

20th April 2022

In the interests of correctness, my garbled English pronunciation of Dinefwr was kindly corrected by my Welsh daughter-in-law, so that I now feel confident to talk of "Din-never". Although Dinefwr/Din-never lies within the National Trust's Dinefwr estate, the castle is owned by the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales and managed by CADW. I was surprised there was no entrance fee and wondered if it was anything to do with the slightly challenging access.

In fact, access can normally be gained from Llandeilo by walking through Castle Woods, but when we visited, pedestrian access was limited due to previous storm damage. We therefore parked in the National Trust car park and walked to the castle up rather a steep but scenic route, complete with bluebells and wild flowers.

As our climb progressed and we approached the castle, we saw it was semi-hidden by trees coming into leaf. It was clear that Castle Dinefwr was situated in a strategically strong place, built on a ridge high above River Tywi, an important waterway that once served as a main communication artery. A steep drop of 100 feet/30.48 metres added to its defensive position.



Camouflaged by trees (photo by Alan Santillo)

Speculation that prehistoric fortifications may underlie the castle have not been proven by any evidence, although remains of Roman activity have been found in Dinefwr Park. Later claims that a castle was first built on the site by Rhodri ap Merfyn (c.820-c.877), known as Rhodri the Great, have likewise lacked any archaeological evidence – but perhaps there's a grain of truth in this folklore.

Rhodri became King of Gwynedd in 844 and Dinefwr later became the chief seat of his grandson, Hywel Dda (c.880-948). Hywel was the first ruler of Deheubarth, the regional name for the realms of southern Wales. He later became king of most of Wales, so whatever the early history of Dinefwr might have been, there's no doubt it occupies a significant position in Welsh history.

We reached the castle and prepared to venture inside through a fortified entrance that was protected by a restored length of battlement. Being the Easter school holiday, there were quite a few visitors continuously coming and going, but patience (and rather a long wait) meant that a photo without modern people in it was eventually achieved. Besides, it was a beautiful spring day.



The fortified entrance (photo by Alan Santillo)

According to interpretations of a 13th-century text from the Welsh lawbooks of the medieval period, Dinefwr held special status as the principal court of Deheubarth. However, although the lawyers' statements may allude to Dinefwr's standing in antiquity, written sources do not actually suggest that the castle has any history before the 12th century.

The earliest reliable record of Dinefwr Castle is from the mid-12th century, when the Welsh chronicler, Brut y Tywysogion, reported that it was captured by Rhys ap Gruffydd (The Lord Rhys) in 1165. As a point of interest, Brut y Tywysogion is one of the most important primary sources of Welsh history, his chronological chronicles (a clever phrase) serving as a continuation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*.

Rhys ap Gruffydd (c.1132-1197) was the ruler of Deheubarth from 1155-1197 and undoubtedly one of the strongest Welsh leaders of the era, capable of resisting the aggressive power of the Anglo-Norman Marcher lords. When William the Conqueror had seized the English throne in 1066, he had quickly become aware that the western borders between England and Wales, known as the Marches, were very vulnerable.

The invading Norman Marcher lords were nobles appointed by the king of England to guard the notorious Marches. They were highly trained soldiers and also competent administrators, so were subsequently given powers to collect taxes, raise their own private armies and build castles. These Marcher lords and the rebellious Welsh princes fought each other fiercely and frequently, but by the time Rhys ap Gruffydd had become Prince of Deheubarth, the Marcher lords had gained the upper hand in south Wales.

In 1158, Rhys had no option but to submit to Norman control in his lands. King Henry II (1154-1189) invaded Deheubarth in 1163 and Rhys was taken prisoner, only to be released a few weeks later without possession of his own lands. However, after combining forces with Owain Gwynedd, Prince of Gwynedd, he regained his lands two years later, including Dinefwr Castle.

In 1171, Rhys and King Henry II came to an agreement that Rhys could keep the lands he had captured and he was given the royal title of Justiciar for South Wales. He was known as the Prince of Wales and a period of relative peace and harmony followed, when Welsh culture, music and poetry flourished. It's thought that he contributed to the first stone fortifications at Dinefwr.

This situation lasted until King Henry II died in 1189 and was succeeded to the throne by King Richard I (1157-1199), which led to new aggression and forced Rhys to go on the defensive again. He had added troubles from conflicts with his own rebellious sons, who even captured him at one point, but the campaigns he led against the Anglo-Normans served to divert his sons from the family infighting. He led a final campaign in 1196 and captured many castles.

The following year, he died unexpectedly and was buried in St Davids Cathedral, after which the family conflict intensified. Rhys had named his eldest legitimate son, Gruffyd ap Rhys II (?-1201) as heir, but he was challenged by his brother Maelgwyn ap Rhys (c. 1170-1230), who was older but illegitimate. Then there was Rhys ap Rhys (?-1234) known as Rhys Gryg, meaning Rhys the Hoarse. One can only guess. It turns out that Rhys ap Gruffydd had apparently fathered at least nine sons and eight daughters, which is frankly enough to do anybody's head in – the history of this clan was certainly having that effect on me!

It was time for a historical breather. We passed through the entrance and found ourselves in an open space in the inner ward, enclosed by walls, from which steps were leading to the main battlements and towers. Several people were having a picnic sitting against a wall, while a boy was playing with a large ball. I couldn't help thinking there's a time and a place, but as it happened, we had time to wait.

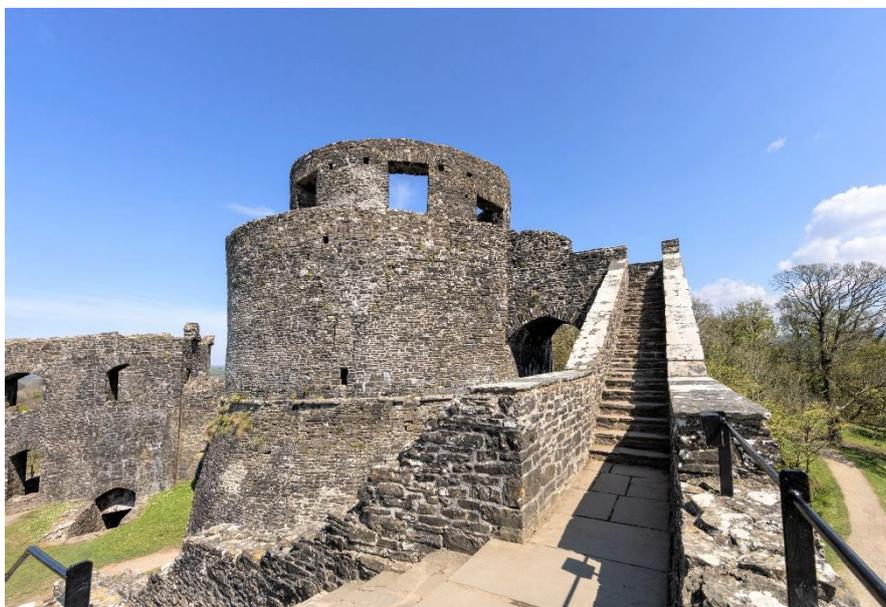


The hall (left) & north chamber block (right) (photo by Alan Santillo)

Dinefwr Castle was repeatedly captured and recaptured by the warring brothers over many years. The ongoing dispute lasted until 1216, when Llywelyn ap Iorweth (c.1173-1240), King of Gwynedd and eventual ruler of all Wales (unsurprisingly known as Llywelyn the Great), forced a family settlement.

Rhys ap Rhys (the hoarse son, Rhys Gryg), was confirmed as lord of Dinefwr and under-lord to Llywelyn the Great, but he opposed Llywelyn's decision to pay tribute to King Henry III (1207-1272, reign 1216-1272), which resulted in a siege at Dinefwr and the surrender of Rhys. The castle was partially demolished to placate Llywelyn, although subsequently it was updated and improved.

Rhys Gryg had married into the influential Anglo-Norman de Clare family and held considerable influence. A time of relative peace ensued for the last 14 years of his life, which presumably allowed him to work on significant building plans. He also held the lands around the nearby Dryslwyn Castle and the similarities between the two castles are more than coincidental. Dinefwr's great circular keep can be dated to around the 1230s, along with the remains of Dryslwyn's circular keep.



Access to the great circular keep (photo by Alan Santillo)

After Rhys Gryg's death in 1233, his lands were apportioned between the various heirs of the Deheubarth dynasty. Dinefwr, along with Carreg Cennen, was inherited by his son Rhys Mechyll (?-1244). Upon Rhys Mechyll's death, his heir was his son Rhys Fychan (c.1220-1271). Meanwhile, another son of Rhys Gryg, named Maredudd ap Rhys (?-1271) allied himself to the now reigning King Edward I (1239-1307, reign 1272-1307, known as Edward Longshanks).

To say there was chaos in the country is an understatement and to cut it short, Maredudd ap Rhys and Rhys Fychan died in 1271, after conflicts of loyalty.

As a result of the war campaign of King Edward I and the Welsh-English war of 1277, the forces of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd (c.1223-1282), the last native and independent Prince of Wales, were defeated. Maredudd's son, Rhys ap Maredudd (c.1250-1292), helped Edward to capture Dinefwr in 1277. He had apparently been promised Dinefwr as a reward for his help, but this did not materialise.

Following the defeat of Llewelyn ap Gruffydd (otherwise known as Llywelyn the Last), those under him, including Rhys ap Maredudd, surrendered to the English. Dinefwr Castle was confiscated and entrusted to the Justiciar of West Wales. The deeply thwarted Rhys eventually became engaged in conflict with the justiciar and in 1287, he attacked and captured Dinefwr Castle, along with Carreg Cennen Castle and Llandovery Castle.

Unsurprisingly, retaliation was quickly forthcoming and an 11,000-strong army led by the king's cousin, Earl Edmund of Cornwall, recaptured the three castles. Despite escaping and continuing his rebellion, Rhys was betrayed by his own men and was captured in 1292. He was executed in York, charged with treason.

Having just about made it into the 14th century, it was time for another historical breather. We ascended the steps to the left of the circular keep and surveyed the scene. The wall walk was narrow and access closed off at the north-west tower, but there was a good view of other castle aspects, including the thickness of the walls and the long drop down below:



Looking down from the south wall-walk

It was very warm and pleasant as we stood in the turret space and looked out at the views of the Tywi valley to the south and west. It was hard to imagine all the bitter conflict, fighting and death of previous centuries, as well as the interrupted lives of ordinary Welsh people attempting to make a living.

When the castle had been captured by King Edward I in 1277, there had been a settlement close to the castle, although excavations have been unable to pinpoint its precise location, as the area is now a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

For the rest of the 13th century, Dinefwr had remained a royal castle, managed by John Giffard (1232-1299), an English nobleman prominent in Wales. In 1310, the constable of the castle was Edmund Haketut. If the 'u' in his surname was replaced by 'o', he'd have had a brilliant surname for a soldier. He was granted the castle, town and demesne/domain of Dinefwr for life – he must have been doing a great job. Numerous repairs were carried out and the castle expanded. When he died, his son inherited the rights, but records from this time haven't survived.

In 1316, Dinefwr Castle was attacked in a Welsh uprising and although records indicate it was burnt, there was no significant damage. The following year, King Edward II (1284-1327, reign 1307-1327) gave it to his controversial favourite, Hugh Despenser. This led to another attack in 1321 by the infuriated English Marcher lords, but the rebellion failed and the castle was returned to Hugh Despenser. However, it was restored to the Crown when Edward was deposed and the unpopular Despenser family fell from grace.

Moving on to the next century, the Welsh rebels of Owain Glyndŵr lay siege to Dinefwr in 1403, but in spite of the small garrison and few supplies, the rebels withdrew after ten days and damages were repaired. Further work took place near the end of the 15th century, when extensive rebuilding was carried out by Sir Rhys ap Thomas (1449-1525), a Welsh soldier and landowner who was loyal to Henry Tudor, later King Henry VII. Some claim that it was Rhys who delivered the death blow to King Richard III with a poleaxe, at the Battle of Bosworth.



Looking out over the north chamber block

Our meanderings had taken us as high as we could go, to gaze out over the north chamber block and out into the deer park. We could see Newton House in the distance and it was easy to imagine crops and livestock being raised on the fertile land, in the nearby fields farmed by townspeople. There would probably have been a chase for the privileged, where nobles could hunt animals such as deer.

Cattle were bred for their meat, milk and hides and were consequently guarded and well looked-after. The rare White Park cattle still on the Dinefwr estate are believed to be descendants of those bred there from as far back as 920.

Rhys ap Gruffydd (1508-1531), the grandson of Rhys ap Thomas, was known not only as being a powerful Welsh landowner, but also as being a rebel. He had expected to inherit his grandfather's estates and titles, but Henry VIII gave his most prestigious titles and powers to Walter Devereux, an English courtier and parliamentarian (and obviously in Henry's good books).

This led to a feud between rebellious Rhys and distinguished Devereux, which escalated into a state of bitter one-upmanship. It eventually came to a head when Rhys, together with a gang of armed supporters, threatened Devereux with a knife. Rhys was arrested and imprisoned in Carmarthen Castle. A bad situation became even worse when Rhys's wife amassed hundreds of supporters who attacked the castle, causing several deaths.

Other disruptions and deaths occurred in the coming months, which led to Rhys's transfer to prison in London. Further controversy followed when Rhys was suspected of attempting to assert himself as Prince of Wales. By this time, the somewhat paranoid King Henry VIII was claiming that Rhys was plotting with James V of Scotland to overthrow his government in Wales. Rhys was convicted of treason and executed in December 1531.

Along with Rhys's other numerous possessions, Dinefwr Castle was confiscated by the Crown, although later recovered by the family. Risking the wrath of their Welsh forebears, Rhys's descendants Anglicised their surname to 'Rice' and in 1660, Newton House was built nearby. The castle keep was later modified as a summer house – the remains of the large windows are still visible at the top of the keep. However, it unfortunately burned down in the 18th century and was abandoned.



Large windows at the top of the keep (with tricky lighting)

Back in the present day, the castle was definitely not abandoned, although the boy playing with the large ball had gone. We took more time to have a good perusal of the different areas, interested that the Tywi river flowed around the castle from the south, west and east, with the hill slopes largely providing protection from the south. The other sides were protected by wide ditches, with an entrance to the outer bailey on the eastern side.



The north chamber block & circular keep (photo by Alan Santillo)

In between visitors leaving and arriving, we took photos from different angles – the big circular keep was popular and impossible to miss. Its entrance is via the cellar at its base, with the top walkway accessible via the battlement walk.

It's known that in the first half of the 13th century, there was a cylindrical keep with a diameter of 44 feet/13.5 metres and walls 8.5 feet/2.6 metres thick in the south-east of the courtyard. After the 17th-century reconstruction, it's not certain what the original height would have been, as similar constructions of that time only had a ground floor and first floor, with possibly a second floor. Its bottom part was also widened, with the width change emphasised by moulding.

Originally, the entrance to the lowest floor was through a hole in the upper floor! Light only came in from three slits on the first floor and small windows in the upper parts, while the ground floor was dark – not a very desirable place to be at all.



The dark ground floor of the keep (photo by Alan Santillo)

As ever, I found it hard to imagine what would have been where in those earlier times, as many changes had been made. The internal buildings of the castle would presumably have been attached to the inner part of the perimeter walls at various stages, possibly built of stone in the northern part of the courtyard, although there were probably some wooden or half-timbered buildings too.

There had been a latrine area at the south-west perimeter wall within the wall's thickness, while the original gate was an ordinary portal in the wall, on the south-east side. In around 1250-1270, a gatehouse was added and in the second half of the 13th century, the gate portal was moved further west.

At some time around the middle of the 13th century, a smaller cylindrical tower of about 23 feet/7 metres diameter was built in the north-west of the castle. Its purpose was likely to have been only for defence and watch purposes, since it had no fireplace or latrine. It was rebuilt later that century, with its round wall on the courtyard side replaced by a straight wall.



The north-west tower with the straight wall (photo by Alan Santillo)

Also in the later 13th century, the quadrangular chamber block was added on the north side of the courtyard. It had a basement with two upper floors and a passage to the latrine turret beside it. The residential chambers would have been on the upper floors, with wooden ceilings and fireplaces. The north-facing windows were built with side stone benches in fairly deep niches, closed with wooden shutters.

Added in the first half of the 14th century was the hall, between the chamber block and the north-west tower. It was 42.6 feet/13 metres long and 19.6 feet/6 metres wide. As expected, it was a place for dining, feasts and hosting guests who had gathered there for ceremonies and official meetings.

This social area was located on the upper floor, made accessible via external stairs and warmed by a fireplace, with a latrine on the west side. The ground floor beneath was used only for storage purposes and had a separate entrance. The hall was connected to the adjacent buildings and although it might seem a strange way of arranging things these days, it must have served its purpose adequately.



The hall (photo by Alan Santillo)

As well as the inner ward, there would have been an outer ward, to the east of the castle's building remains. The outer ward was separated into a slightly higher northern part and a lower southern part, which we had walked along on our way to the castle's current entrance. A gatehouse was known to have been at the eastern end, but the buildings of the outer ward are mostly unknown.

All in all, Dinefwr Castle has survived into the 21st century as a well-preserved ruin that stands testament to the achievements and fortitude of the Middle Ages, through some tempestuous times. I was pleasantly surprised with our visit to a castle with free access, some accessible wall walks and extensive views. Also, there was opportunity for some creative photography:



View from the great circular keep (photo by Alan Santillo)