

## **WISTON CASTLE**

### **Wiston, Pembrokeshire, Wales SA62 4PN**

**14<sup>th</sup> May 2011**

On our way back from a week's holiday in Pembrokeshire, we stopped at a small but inviting motte and bailey castle, in the village of Wiston in south-west Wales. It's considered one of the best preserved of its type in Wales, built on the summit of a hill to the north of Wiston. There was a small car park nearby and as we walked up the grassy approach, the motte beckoned from where it rose stoically at 30 feet/9 metres above the base of the ditch. There are no visitor facilities, but it's open at all times with no charge and is maintained by Cadw.



**The grassy approach** (photo by Alan Santillo)

My grasp of Welsh history isn't wonderful, but here goes. Until the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, this area of south-west Wales belonged to the Welsh state of Deheubarth. The exact set-up of Deheubarth is unclear, but it may have been an amalgamation of sub-kingdoms. At around this time, there was a Lord of Dyfed named Cadifor, from the earlier line of the rulers of Dyfed (more of Cadifor in due course). The kingdom of Dyfed was one of several minor kingdoms that had emerged in south-west Wales during the end of Roman rule and its aftermath.

The ruling king of Deheubarth was Rhys ap Tewdwr (which sounds suspiciously like Tudor to my English ears) and he was a member of the Dinefwr dynasty, which was a branch descended from Rhodri the Great. After the Battle of Hastings, Rhys ap Tewdwr (c. 1040-1093) accepted William the Conqueror's rule and presumably benefitted from being a loyal vassal.

When William the Conqueror died in 1088, Rhys ap Tewdwr decided he was no longer a vassal, having assumed the arrangement was for William's lifetime only. In alliance with other rebel vassals, he committed treason by attacking Worcester and subsequently made his lands forfeit. In 1092, the aforementioned Cadifor died and his sons no longer accepted the authority of Rhys ap Tewdwr, calling for a rival to take the kingship.

Rhys ap Tewdwr – I like writing that name – managed to suppress the rebellion, but he was killed in the Battle of Brecon the following year, whilst attacking Bernard de Neufmarché (another humdinger name). Bernard was a minor Norman lord who rose to power in the Welsh Marches, an imprecise area along the border between England and Wales. His wife was Nest, granddaughter of Gruffydd ap Llywelyn, a previous king of Wales.

Following the death of Rhys ap Tewdwr, the king's agents seized much of Deheubarth and many other areas, with west Dyfed being seized by Arnulf de Montgomery. The Wiston landscape then became subject to a Marcher Lordship – a Marcher Lord being a noble appointed by the king of England to guard the Welsh Marches. In 1102, King Henry I came to power, but a number of his vassals (including Arnulf de Montgomery) rebelled unsuccessfully in favour of the king's elder brother Robert. Henry declared Arnulf's lands forfeit and kept the Marcher Lordship for himself.

In 1108, Flanders suffered calamitous flooding and since it was the homeland of King Henry I's mother, many refugees asked Henry for help. He allowed them to settle in his Marcher Lordship, where they maintained their culture for at least a century. Interestingly, the difference between the original areas of Fleming population and the rest of Wales is still identifiable in local DNA.

This is where Wiston Castle fits in, as a Flemish leader named Wizo built the castle to control his lands. A settlement then arose around the castle, which came to be known as Wiston, derived from the Old Flemish/Saxon for 'Wizo's town or enclosure'. Wizo set about apportioning some of his land to the care of other Flemings, one of whom in 1130 was his son, Walter Fitz-Wizo.



**Wiston Castle motte**

The castle first appeared in documents in 1147, when it was attacked by the Welsh, led by Hywel ab Owain. I love the Welsh language, but it seems inconsistent to be 'ab' rather than 'ap'. I found it necessary to know which is correct, but it seems to be an either/or situation, as both are used as a contraction of the Welsh word 'mab' meaning son. The Welsh patronymic system, of course, used the male line only in family trees. It's still inconsistent...

Wiston, under the control of Walter Fitz-Wizo, was captured by Hywel, the son of Owain. The Flemings soon reclaimed it, but there was still much unrest. Rhys ap Gruffydd, the grandson of Rhys ap Tewdwr, was the ruler of Deheubarth from 1155-1197 and his sons were trying to aid their father to re-establish Deheubarth. In 1193, one of his sons named Hywel Sais ap Rhys (the names are getting better), led an attack on the Flemings. Wiston Castle was captured and another of Wizo's sons named Philip was taken captive, along with his wife and sons. It took two years for the Flemings to recapture the castle, although the details are unknown.

A quarter of a century later in 1220, the castle was sacked by the native prince Llywelyn ap Iorweth, later known as Llywelyn the Great. He eventually became ruler of all Wales, dominating the country for 45 years. Back at Wiston, he had caused immense damage to the castle, although probably not him personally. Later, a restoration was ordered by the Marcher Earl of Pembroke, William Marshal (or Guillaume le Maréchal, to add to the scintillating name collection).

What took place after 1220 has been lost in the mists of unrecorded history, although it appears the castle was left whilst in an intermediate building stage. The remains of the Norman stone shell-keep still stand at 13 feet/4 metres high in some places. Although mostly unbroken, a section to the north was possibly a casualty of Llywelyn's attack. The original towers had been built of wood, but the new incomplete structures were built of stone.

Whilst it's known that the castle was owned at around that time by Sir John Wogan, nothing is known of either his ancestry, or how he came into possession of the castle. He obviously didn't rate it much, as he proceeded to abandon Wiston and moved to Picton Castle. This is a medieval castle near Haverfordwest in Pembrokeshire, originally built by a Flemish knight at the end of the 13th century. Incredibly, the descendants of Sir John Wogan still live there.

The history doesn't quite stop at this point, as around four centuries later in 1643, a small outpost was established at Wiston by Royalists in the English Civil War. It may have been in the abandoned motte, but further abandonment ensued without any fighting. During the following year, Parliamentary troops advanced into the area, defeating the Royalists in a pitched battle that took place at Colby Moor, just south of Wiston, causing the castle garrison to withdraw.

It occurred to me that I was unsure what a pitched battle was and it turns out that it's not actually a battle involving pitch, but a battle in which both sides choose the time and the location. There is an option to disengage before battle commences or shortly thereafter, which I must admit sounds both chivalrous and sensible.

As we approached the castle with its 75 steps or so (I lost count), it became apparent how the 30 feet/9 metres tall motte was higher than when viewed from a distance. That was no surprise, of course, but it became clear to see how it would have allowed a very good vantage point from which to repel invaders. Dimension-wise, the motte is 164 feet/50 metres in diameter and 59 feet/18 metres at its summit.

Once at the top, we had the castle to ourselves and were able to enjoy an unhurried look around at both views of the surrounding countryside and the castle remains. I know it sounds silly, but it felt quite a friendly castle, unlike some that seem still to impart memories of turmoil. Apart from that, it was compact and well-built – in other words, fit for purpose.



**The archway still stands at the ruined shell keep** (photo by Alan Santillo)

On the flat top of the motte, parts of the encircling stone wall known as the shell keep were all that remained from what had been the main fortification. Inside there would have been other buildings, mostly made of timber. The external face of the shell-keep was polygonal in shape, with eighteen short sections, although some of them have subsided into the ditch below, on the north side. Inside, the shell-keep wall was pleasingly circular.

On the south side, an arched entrance was open to the elements. It would once have been the main gate that barred attackers with a heavy wooden door. On either side of the archway, the hinge points and drawbar sockets that would have been used to secure the main gate still survive. I confess that a nearby information board informed me of this arrangement.

There would once have been another storey with a parapet and the main residential upper floor would have been reached by some stone steps just inside the doorway. The walls themselves are substantial, standing at between 9.8 feet/3 metres to 13 feet/4 metres high and varied in width, from between 4.9 feet/1.5 metres to 6.6 feet/2 metres.

The large oval bailey is surrounded by a well-preserved bank, which crosses the motte ditch to the mound. The bailey ditch still survives on the west and north, but the two other sides are filled in. The bailey entrance is at the north-east, strengthened by a protective earthwork.



**Substantial walls**

Perhaps because it was a small castle, I found it relatively easy to imagine how it might have looked hundreds of years before. Originally built from earth and timber, earth ramparts existing since the Iron Age had been used. I could visualise the timber tower, surrounded by its equally wooden palisade, with a dry ditch surrounding the base of the mound. Up aloft, defenders of the castle would have had access to the sidewalk stretching along the walls, which were topped with a parapet (low protective wall along the roof-edge) and battlements (tops of the walls).



**A last look through the archway**

However, it was time to step back into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the aid of the 75 or so steps leading down to the grassy land below. It had been a surprising castle and I was very glad that we'd stopped by on our way home. It never ceases to amaze me what stories each castle has to tell!