

Out and About

in Swansea Castle

Colin Wheldon James

The hall and south-east tower.

The ruins of Swansea Castle stand at the edge of Swansea's shopping centre and are generally ignored by shoppers and passers-by who just ... well ... pass by. But this was to change to some extent in 2012, and the HA's Swansea Branch adopted a very close relationship with the building. But first, the history ...

In 1106, King Henry I granted the lordship of Gower to Henry de Beaumont, first earl of Warwick and the first Norman lord of Gower. Henry de Beaumont chose the site for the principal castle of his new lordship near the mouth of the River Tawe, on a defensible knoll alongside the river, a little to the north of the present ruins, building it sometime in the few years after 1106. This site and its immediate surroundings

became the borough of medieval Swansea. In 1116 the outer defences were burnt down by Welsh forces led by Gryffudd ap Rhys. However, having been built of timber, they were easily rebuilt.

Before the middle of the twelfth century, it seems that the political situation in the area had stabilised enough to allow the castle to be used for the minting of coins, with silver pennies being produced in the years 1137 to 1141. The stability of this time, however, was just a characteristic of a time of attacks of lesser ferocity than had been experienced in 1116.

There was a resurgence of a more powerful Welsh military presence in 1192 when the castle suffered an almost successful siege by the forces of the Lord Rhys, ruler of Deheubarth in west Wales. Twenty years later, Rhys Gryg, son of

the Lord Rhys, attacked the lordship in a move that began a series of assaults at a time when King John and his barons were seriously out of harmony with each other. In 1217, Llewelyn ab Iorwerth (Llewelyn the Great), prince of Gwynedd, took possession of the lordship of Gower and granted the castle to Rhys Gryg. Later that year, the same Rhys destroyed the castle in reprisal for the siege of Caerleon by the Normans. However, 1218 saw Llewelyn the Great make peace with the new king, Henry III, and Gower passed once more into Anglo-Norman hands. It would seem that it was about this time that the opportunity was taken to rebuild Swansea Castle in stone, although it has been claimed that the replacement of timber by stone first occurred a little before the end of the twelfth century.

Arcading on south external wall.



In the twentieth century, parts of that first site were excavated on a few occasions, with the findings giving an idea of the size and layout of the structure and its surroundings. It is clear that the position of that first castle was the best that could be found in the vicinity in the context of the early-twelfth century, and it generally served its military purpose well until time and pacification caused that purpose to be no longer necessary. By 1316, the Anglo-Norman conquest of Wales was complete and the castle's function as a garrison had lost its significance, although this was briefly revived during Owain Glyndŵr's rebellion in the early-fifteenth century. As a seat of local government, of course, the importance of the castle was still strong.

Around the turn of the fourteenth century, the building of the 'New Castle', that is, the structure that we see today, took place. This was built within the line of the outer defence walls but was a structure separate from the component buildings of the old castle. It has been suggested that, because of the similarity of arcading on the castle's south wall with those of the bishop's palaces at St David's and Lamphey, the structure at Swansea was itself a bishop's palace. However, the arcading in question was added slightly later than the construction of the castle and the greater likelihood is that the design was just copied from those west-Wales palaces. It may be noted that in 1332 Henry de Gower, bishop of St David's, was having the Hospital of the Blessed David built, which was just a few hundred yards from the castle, so stone-masons with knowledge of the west-Wales arcading were probably involved with this subsequent adornment of the castle.

In later times, when the not too distant castle of Oystermouth was a more attractive residence, the castle deteriorated and, in the ensuing centuries, it underwent a number of varied uses. For example, in the early 1500s, an alternative use for a portion of the castle was that of a prison.

After the Civil War in the mid-seventeenth century, the Parliamentary government ordered that Swansea Castle be 'disgarrisoned and the works slighted'. This is likely to have been a stock phrase used in respect of the many castles around England and Wales that had held out against Parliamentary forces. In the case of Swansea Castle, there was very little slighting work to be carried out as the castle was already in a decayed state. It is possible that the north-west wall of the courtyard was removed in this exercise.

In 1750, part of the castle was turned into a workhouse, which was run by the Overseers of the Poor until a more suitable building was found in 1817. Also in the mid-eighteenth century, some rooms within the castle (probably the undercrofts) were used for storage of goods by certain local traders. In the early-nineteenth century, the hall of the castle

Temporary access to the solar.



was used as a chandler's factory, but by the middle of that century, it had come into the use of the 1st Glamorgan Artillery Volunteers as a drill hall.

By the late-seventeenth century, the north-east tower was put to new uses, such as housing a glassworks. Here, squat, black, glass wine-bottles were produced. Seaweed ash was used in the glass-making process and coal was used as fuel, both of which were to be found in abundance in the locality. The proximity of the port would certainly have helped in the trade of the products. In 1696, the glassworks at Swansea Castle was one of thirty-seven such manufactories throughout England and Wales. But by the mid-eighteenth century, the glassworks business had discontinued and the building was adapted for use as a debtors' prison which operated until 1858.

The first floor of the north-east tower was partly rebuilt in the late-eighteenth century to form a private debtors' prison. This function (here and in 6 similar prisons elsewhere in Britain) continued until closure by Act of Parliament in 1858. There were three cells, accessible through the gaoler's room, each with a fireplace. Debtors could have their own food and furniture and could carry on their business from the cell.

The use of the castle as a seat of local government declined and in 1585 the corporation built a new Town Hall within the castle's courtyard. This survived until its demolition in 1856. In 1774, Swansea's corporation decided to use part of the surrounding land of the castle as the site of a meat market, which complemented the main market that was at that time situated at the top of nearby Wind Street. However, this site was never popular with Swansea butchers.

In 1858, after the removal of the Town Hall, the courtyard was used as the site for the construction of Swansea's main post office. When completed, this building, together with other neighbouring structures, obscured the view of much of the

Photographs are by R A Crahart, who is chair of the Swansea Branch's Marketing Committee.

The north-east tower.



castle from the town. The former post office building was later taken over by the *Cambria Daily Leader* newspaper (later the *South Wales Evening Post*, with the addition of the *Herald of Wales*). The building, which had been bomb-damaged during enemy attack during the Second World War, and subsequently repaired, was demolished in 1976.

While much of the castle had been masked from the town by other structures, the demolition of the former post office, together with the removal of adjoining buildings, brought the bulk of the castle back into the view of people within Swansea's shopping area.

Today, the castle is in the ownership of Cadw (the organisation in Wales that is responsible for the care and maintenance of historic buildings) and the land around the structure is owned by the Council of the City & County of Swansea. Over many decades, and until fairly recently, the castle has remained closed to the public. The council has maintained the lawn and Cadw has kept its eye on the stonework but the castle has remained generally unnoticed as one of only two tangible relics of Swansea's medieval past. (The other is a single wall of a nearby pub; in fact, a wall that was once part of the Hospital of the Blessed David.)

But this circumstance changed slightly with the Open House project, through which many buildings that are usually shut to the public allow open access for just a couple of occasions

a year. Swansea Castle is one such building. On a weekend in early 2012, members of the public were allowed into the castle in a scheme operated by Swansea Council with the co-operation of Cadw. The council provided a tour guide, dressed in the part of, he claimed, King Arthur. Arthur's connection with the castle is still something of a puzzle in some people's minds. The guide had a very engaging, friendly demeanour but, unfortunately, knew very little about the history of the building around which he was leading people.

Because of this provision of inaccurate information, the HA's Swansea Branch suggested to the City Council that perhaps all was not as right as it should be. A representative of the council, in turn, suggested that perhaps the Branch might do better. The gauntlet was cast; all the Branch had to do was pick it up, which, of course, it did. A project group of Branch members was formed, four of whom volunteered to be tour guides, with two others volunteering for reception duties at the site. The next Open House event was to be on 8 and 9 September 2012. The general history of the castle was researched and the results printed so that all guides were singing from the same hymn sheets, so to speak. Branch polo shirts were provided in order that guides and reception staff might easily be identified. The Branch was prepared but would have to rely on a higher authority for good weather.

The weekend in question arrived and the weather proved fine. Together with helpers from the City Council, the Swansea Branch went into action with the guides taking tours on a rotating basis and the reception staff planning and directing such tours as well as dealing with the public who arrived at the site. The City Council had arranged for access to be by ticket only, such tickets being available at no charge over the internet. However, many people turned up ticketless having noticed the activity within the castle grounds and investigating; of course they were allowed access, as long as the number on each tour did not go beyond the health and safety maximum. During the event, the Branch guides and reception staff dealt with over 500 visitors who included some tourists from Italy and Australia. All in all, the event proved a huge success with the visitors having thoroughly enjoyed the experience of seeing

behind the walls of an historic building into which they were not usually allowed.

Because of the success of the event, the Swansea Branch has been invited to carry out its guide duties again in 2013 during the next Open House event and, possibly, at other events during the year. Also, in the near future, the Branch's Swansea Castle Group intends writing a guide booklet for use of visitors and the interested public.

The Swansea Branch is pleased about the link it has forged with Swansea City & County Council; is grateful for the work of Branch members Rosemary Crahart, Colin James, Roy Kneath, Ray Savage, Karmen Thomas and Liz Savage; and is rather proud of its new role as, unofficially but effectively, the Friends of Swansea Castle.

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