COITY CASTLE/CASTELL COETY

Coity, Bridgend, Glamorgan, Wales CF35 6BH

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Since this castle is in Wales, I feel it should be referred to as Castell Coety, another castle that began as a late-11th century ringwork. Previous to that, however, it's very likely that there had been an earlier structure there from Roman times, since the location was of strategic importance in relation to a number of Roman routes. Unfortunately, no excavation to uncover Roman remains has been undertaken.

Having somehow driven past the usual entrance where there was a space for cars, we found ourselves parking up a street and finding our way along a narrow path next to the Church of St Mary the Virgin, on the east side of the castle, into a field in which we stood in direct sunlight looking at the northern exterior walls (including the keep and north-east gatehouse). Although we discovered there was no access into the inner ward, it was still of interest to see part of the exterior and the castle's topographical position, set upon what seemed like a substantial motte.

Keep and north-east gatehouse on the north exterior (photo by Alan Santillo)

A short while later, having located the correct entrance to the outer ward via the west gatehouse, we decided to walk outside again, along the southern external walls. We firstly walked past what was said to be a barn and then encountered the south curtain wall and the service range. What I would have truly loved was an audio guide that could be downloaded, or even some excellent information boards.

We were, in fact, walking around the stone structures of the circular ringwork that indicate the shape of the earlier earthwork castle. Although the remains of Castell Coety are said to be a jumble of architectural styles that span the centuries, this has the benefit of serving as a reflection of its longstanding occupation. Despite this 'jumble', the features that remain from each era cast light upon its long and varied life – and I do like the way that smaller details can help in this.

As we passed, I couldn't help admiring the uniformity of the building details in the south curtain wall, window apertures and a small corner rectangular structure between the wall and the service range – and we hadn't even explored inside yet.

One of the larger features we passed was the latrine tower, which despite its insalubrious name, looked both upmarket for the times and functional, projected away from other buildings of the inner ward. Where the latrine contents ended up was another matter, but flushing toilets had not yet been invented.

South curtain wall and service range (photo by Alan Santillo)

Latrine tower

As we continued to walk along in the pleasant August air, trying to cut out modern buildings from the edge of our photos, it was even easier to see the height of the motte – or so I thought, until later research shed a different light on my notion.

Unlike the usual motte and bailey constructions of the era, the Castell Coety ringwork was in fact a clever way of using the difficult Vale of Glamorgan terrain to serve a purpose. Since there was a thick limestone shelf at the site with merely a thin layer of soil available, the usual method of piling up soil to create the mound was a problem, the solution being the ringwork formation. Sorted!

Past the chapel to the north-east gatehouse

Having walked past what had been the chapel on the east wall, we reached the north-east gatehouse. We had first seen this from the field, albeit inaccessible, but this time we could walk through it into the inner ward. As most gatehouses are, it looked solidly built, although information about it seems surprisingly scarce.

It appears to have been added to the inner ward after the Welsh uprising of 1404-1405, facing the church and composed of some interesting features, with a window and some steps leading upward in an opening in one of the walls, presumably to a guardroom and tower. I rather liked the different colouring of the stonework:

North-east gatehouse L (photo by Alan Santillo) **& steps in wall leading upward R**

Since we had entered the inner ward, it was time for some history. The Norman conquest of 1066 brought a great many changes with it and in Wales, King William I (reign 1066-87) appointed some of his key noblemen (later known as Marcher lords) to guard the border lands (the Welsh Marches) between England and Wales. These lords became powerful, if not popular, and had stone fortifications built to control their own area of the kingdom. One such lord, Robert FitzHamon, Baron of Gloucester, ordered a series of fortifications to be built, including one at Coety.

The startlingly named Payne 'the Demon' de Turberville was one of Robert's followers and allegedly one of the Twelve Knights of Glamorgan. One can't help wondering why he earned such a nickname, but best not go there. Despite carrying out the conquest of Glamorgan, Robert failed to grant Payne territory of his own, so Payne took measures into his own hands and seized the lands around Coety.

The Welsh lord of the area, Morgan ap Meurig, made a very shrewd move and offered Payne his daughter's hand in marriage, thus avoiding an outright defeat. Payne became lord of Coety and work on the castle began, no later than the beginning of the 12th century. While it may be possible there was already a Welsh-built stronghold at the site, Payne put his stamp on the area by creating his own earth and wood ringwork fortification, typically of the Norman style with a circular embankment surrounded by a deep ditch and timber palisades on top.

By the beginning of the 12th century, two other castles had joined with Coety to defend the lordship of Glamorgan along the western border of the Marches, namely Newcastle (erected by Robert FitzHamon) and Ogmore (erected by William de Londres. Together, these three castles would have presented a daunting front.

In the 1180s, the lordship and control of Coety had passed to Sir Gilbert de Turbeville (presumably not a 'demon'). He carried out significant upgrades in stonework, including a stone keep and a curtain wall to protect the inner ward.

The keep

The next 200 years or so saw the Turbeville family retaining control of the castle until the late 1300s, when their direct male line of succession eventually died out.

The inner ward (photo by Alan Santillo)

The impressively named Sir Lawrence Berkerolles next inherited Coety through marriage to a de Turbeville daughter. He was very probably the one responsible for making extensive renovations, with much of what remains now dating to that period. A domestic range was attached to the keep by a middle gatehouse, with the gate thus giving access to the residential area inside the inner bailey. The range of domestic apartments consisted of a central first-floor hall above a vaulted undercroft, which was reached by a spiral stair.

Other 14th-century remains include the great hall fashioned with finely cut stone and its service block, complete with the usual kitchen, pantry and buttery, as well as a rather more unusual circular malting kiln. There was clearly a considerable amount of money spent on what must have been a castle of some presence.

The service block (photo by Alan Santillo)

It was also Sir Lawrence who added the fine north-east gatehouse through which we'd entered, opening toward the church and complete with a portcullis and drawbridge. A new stone curtain wall around the outer bailey was down to him and also the previously mentioned latrine tower, which was not only functional, but served as an observation post from which guards could fire down on attackers.

Another improvement was the replacement of wooden flooring with stone vaults that must have been substantial, as the central octagonal pier for the vaulting is still quite noticeable when wandering around the castle ruins:

Octagonal pier for vaulting

Owain Glyndŵr, the last native Welsh person to hold the title Prince of Wales, unsuccessfully attacked Castell Coety in the early 15th century. Soon afterwards in 1411, the death of Sir Lawrence Berkerolles resulted in a few years of confusion about inheritance, involving branches of families connected in various ways.

Lady Joan Verney, the daughter of Margaret de Turbeville, took occupancy of the castle despite being a single widow with no heirs, which did not fit in with 15th century traditions of inheritance. However, William Gamage claimed he had a right to the castle and lands because his marriage to the youngest sister of Richard de Turbeville had produced male heirs and would therefore keep things in the family.

He was clearly not amused by Lady Joan's dubious squatting rights and gathered forces together to besiege Lady Verney in the castle – but King Henry IV was displeased and had Gamage and his followers imprisoned in the Tower of London. The descendants of the de Turbeville family were proving quite turbulent…

William Gamage was released and reclaimed his inheritance in 1413, when King Henry V came to the throne. Since Owain Glyndwr's attack had resulted in a lot of damage to the castle, he set about upgrading the site. The defences were repaired and strengthened, with a new west gatehouse built (the current day entrance) and a tower in the south wall converted into a gatehouse. A link wall was also added between the outer ward and inner ward curtain walls.

A chapel was added with a tall east window to the eastern end of the domestic range, although its interior only survives at basement level. A large barn was also added against the south wall of the outer ward. However, as I walked around trying to get my bearings, it seemed a great pity that hardly any information is available on site, as to what was where, when it was built and by whom. For such an important castle in local history, it would be wonderful if Cadw, the organisation managing the site, could spend some money in improving available information.

Chapel remains to the left (photo by Alan Santillo)

There seems no doubt that much upkeep was carried out while the Gamage family were castle owners, renovating it to be more habitable, stylish and comfortable, with grand windows and chimney pieces, as well as several fireplaces and latrines.

Some fancy fireplace detail (photo by Alan Santillo)

All this effort, though, came to an end when the heiress Barbara Gamage married Sir Robert Sidney, Earl of Leicester. They must have decided that Coety was too much of a backwater for their lifestyle and in 1584 moved to Penshurst Place in Kent, a desirable residence belonging to the Sidney family. It was much more in keeping with the contemporary social and political scene of the time to which they aspired and it must have suited them, as they had eleven children.

Thus Castell Coety was abandoned, despite still being owned by the Sidney family until the 19th century. It inevitably fell into a state of neglect and decay, never regaining its earlier splendour, with 19th-century historical records referring to it as ruinous. It seemed a sad ending, as we prepared to abandon the castle ourselves, pausing by the keep to admire the building skills of centuries gone by.

The keep (photo by Alan Santillo)

In the outer ward, more people had arrived to explore the ruins, which was somehow a pleasing thought, as if Castell Coety is not completely abandoned after all. If we'd had our wits about us, we would have taken a look inside the church by the north-east gatehouse, where two effigies of de Turbeville women reside, as well as a medieval carved oak chest. The church was built in the English Decorated Gothic style and has a battlemented tower. Intriguing. Perhaps another time…