OGMORE CASTLE/CASTELL OGWR

8 Crompton Way, Bridgend, Vale of Glamorgan, Wales CF32 0QP

17th September 2024

It was a beautiful September morning when we visited Ogmore Castle, located in an equally beautiful setting overlooking a set of stepping stones across the River Ewenny. Along with the nearby castles of Coity and Newcastle, it forms a trio of fortresses built in the early 12th century to guard against attacks from the west.

Picturesque stepping stones

To reach the castle, we had driven past a riding centre and down a lane to a small parking area at the river's edge. From the start, there were always horses in the background, adding to the whole experience and making it easier to imagine times gone past, when horses would have been an abiding feature of life.

As for the stepping stones, a surprising number of people used them either to cross from the castle side to Ogmore beach, or vice versa. The riding centre also used the stones to ride or lead horses from the centre to grazing fields the other side of the river and vice versa. It was quite a mesmerising sight.

Dragging ourselves away from the tranquil scene, it was time to become engrossed in some castle history. I knew nothing about Ogmore before visiting, although I surmised its history was likely to be very similar to other castles nearby, being in the area of the Welsh Marches that had been the scene of so much conflict.

According to Caradoc of Llancarfan, a 12th-century Welsh cleric and author, there had already been a manor and castle at Ogmore, which were given to William de Londres in the early 12th century by Robert Fitzhamon, who had conquered the Glamorgan region of South Wales following the Norman invasion of 1066.

In around 1089, the above-named Robert Fitzhamon, Baron of Gloucester, had attacked the Welsh kingdom of Morgannwg in South Wales, deposing the last native king of Morgannwg, Iestin ap Gwrgan. Robert FitzHamon then proceeded along the coast to build Newport Castle, before travelling west to conquer the Vale of Glamorgan, setting up his headquarters in Cardiff.

Before 1106, he went further west to the River Ogmore, where this natural barrier became a temporary border between the Normans and the native Welsh. Robert FitzHamon and his associates constructed three castles to defend the conquered areas: Robert himself had Newcastle Castle built, while Payne de Turberville had Coity Castle built and William de Londres had Ogmore Castle built.

Our first viewing of Ogmore Castle was quite impressive, as we looked up above us from the car parking area. The remains were limited, with a keep and some outer walls, but what remained looked as if it was going to be well worth a visit. The castle's situation alone was notable in itself, with its grounds surrounded by a deep, rock-cut ditch. These grounds would stay dry apart from when the River Ewenny flooded during high tide. The ditch that enclosed the castle's inner bailey would then fill, with the flow regulated by an embedded stone wall that blocked the rising waters, hence keeping the castle's interior dry. Simple but effective.

From the car parking area down by the river

William de Londres was one of the Twelve Knights of Glamorgan, a legendary group of mercenaries who followed FitzHamon. These were very turbulent times and one can only wonder at the violence involved. All that aside, when William received the lands around Ogmore from FitzHamon at the beginning of the 12th century, he set about erecting the usual Norman design of an earth and timber defensive ringwork, which guarded the ford on the River Ogmore.

At this point, I realise I am confused about the River Ogmore and the River Ewenny. It turns out that the River Ogmore runs generally from north to south past Bridgend and Ogmore. Along the way, the River Ewenny, as well as the River Llynfi and the River Garw, are all tributaries of the River Ogmore, which flows into the sea between the Merthy Mawr sand dunes and Ogmore-by-Sea. Sorted.

Having walked a short distance uphill to the castle grounds and into the outer ward, we were met by an information panel, for which I'm always grateful. It seemed a fairly large site and the view before us was inviting. There happened to be a small group of schoolchildren there, but they didn't stay long after having a short history lesson from their teacher – and it's a brilliant way to learn history.

Inside the outer ward (photo by Alan Santillo)

The new fortification was first recorded in written accounts in 1116, when it was attacked by Gruffydd ap Rhys, the Welsh Prince of Deheubarth. He also attacked several other castles, causing much destruction, until defeated during an attack on Aberystwyth Castle, after which his followers dispersed. At Ogmore Castle, William de Londres' butler, Arnold, is credited with defending the castle in William's absence. For what must have been a very creditable effort, he was knighted as Sir Arnold Butler and was also rewarded with the manor and castle of Dunraven.

After this debacle, the earth and timber fortification was quickly reconstructed with stone, which included a large keep. Its remains greeted us at the entrance into the inner ward, over the dry moat via a modern wooden bridge:

Approach to the inner ward (photo by Alan Santillo)

William de Londres died in 1126 and it is his son, Maurice, who is usually credited with the building of the large, rectangular keep that could well be the oldest Norman keep in Glamorgan today. It is unmissably situated north of the main gateway and is the castle's tallest surviving building, once having risen to an imposing height of around 46 feet/14 metres, complete with three storeys. It must have been noticeable from far away! The first storey contained the great hall, complete with an ornate fireplace and detailed windows, as befitted a grand space.

View of the keep from the south

Only three of its original walls now survive, which to my untrained eye looked to be composed of some diverse building materials. There are apparently Lias limestone slabs, glacial pebbles, brown mortar and some irregularly-shaped field stones (stones from fields?) I gazed upwards to see some deep, tall window apertures and what looked to be a few tantalising remains of finer architectural features. It would have been so good to have a dedicated information panel.

Interesting building materials on the inner side of the keep

Maurice de Londres was a major figure in the conquest of central South Wales, since he held the castles at Kidwelly and Oystermouth as well as Ogmore. In around 1135, a Welsh uprising under Rhys ap Gruffydd took place, but Maurice remained in control, despite his castles being the target of such raids and presumably being damaged. Maurice died in 1166 and was succeeded by his son, William, who understandably decided to further strengthen the castle's defences.

William added a gatehouse, replaced the timber palisade with a stone wall and added a second storey to the keep. A staircase led from the great hall at ground level to the second storey, which served as private apartments for the lord and his family (and must have felt both safer and warmer, being heated by fireplaces). Bodily needs were catered for by a latrine tower in the north-west corner.

A third storey was added in the early 13th century, serving as an upper defensive gallery. The three floors were separated by wooden ceilings and both floors were covered with plaster, thus making what today looks like a draughty, inhospitable building into a reasonably comfortable dwelling place, albeit a fortified one.

It may have been William who added another building opposite the keep, although only its cellar survives, with steps leading to a vaulted passageway. One of these steps had been formed with the incomplete shaft of an early 11th-century stone cross, the replica of which is situated on a stone plinth outside the keep.

I had actually noticed this stone while admiring the keep, so went for a closer look. There were intriguing inscriptions on both of its faces, but the writing looked indecipherable to my unskilled eye. However, it is said to read: "Be it known to all that Artmail gave this estate to God and Glywys and Nertat and his daughter", so I hope Artmail is pleased that a replica of part of his stone is still on show.

Remnant of an 11th-century cross

The above-mentioned 12th-century building opposite the keep was originally a freestanding building with four sides and walls around 3.6 feet/1.1 metre thick. Down below, there were highly placed windows and a narrow door in the east wall. This, plus the lack of a fireplace, indicated the room had been used for storage. The purpose of the upper floors of this building is not known, but at some point two small rooms were added on both sides of the steps to the basement on the west side. The remains looked very sturdy, one wonders what happened?

Cellar of 12th century building (photo by Alan Santillo)

Most of the construction other than that already mentioned dates from the 13th century, when the de Londres family owned the castle. New buildings were added as needed, including a long rectangular building at the northern side of the inner ward, which probably housed another hall with a neighbouring small kitchen building. Unlike similar structures, this hall building was probably only one storey, so did not extend above the wall-walk at the top of the perimeter walls. It had no fireplaces in any walls, but would no doubt have been warmed by a central hearth. The sun was providing warmth today, as two people had placed fold-up chairs next to a wall inside and were happily soaking up the rays while reading a newspaper!

The hall (photo by Alan Santillo)

Returning to the history, William de Londres (grandson of the first mentioned William de Londres), died in 1206, followed by his son, Thomas de Londres, in 1221. This ended the ownership of the de Londres family, as William's daughter, Hawise, was next in line and due to 13th-century law, the castle passed to her first husband, Walter de Braose and then her second husband, Patrick de Chaworth.

As the Anglo-Normans pushed their Welsh opponents further west, Ogmore Castle was no longer on the front line, although because of its wealth and a fortuitous supply of good stone, improvements to the building continued to be made. By the end of the 13th century, when King Edward I (reign 1272-1307) completed the conquest of Wales, its purpose had become a centre of justice and administration.

Hawise and Patrick de Chaworth's son, Payne, married Isabella de Beachamp and they had a daughter, Maud. In 1297, Maud married Henry of Lancaster, so the castle became part of the Duchy of Lancaster. When Henry Bolingbroke from the House of Lancaster became King Henry IV in 1399, it thus became Crown property.

In the 14th century, a limekiln was built in the north-west corner of the outer bailey over an undefined 13th-century structure. Next to it, when the castle was acting as a centre of administrative justice for the Earls of Lancaster, a rectangular courthouse was built, flanked by two rooms and with a simple doorway.

Court house building (limekiln left)

The limekiln (photo by Alan Santillo)

At the beginning of the 15th century, the Welsh uprising of Owain Glyndŵr resulted in some damage to Ogmore Castle, although repairs were delayed until around the 1440s. A new courthouse was constructed in 1454 and was in use until the 19th century. Also in response to the Glyndŵr revolt, two more gatehouses were added in the mid-15th century. The one on the west may have replaced the southern gate, but one at the north-east was new, with a bridge across the ditch.

The castle remained in use and was described as well-kept into the 1530s, but only the courthouse was functioning by the first half of the 17th century. The other buildings unfortunately had to be abandoned, as they had fallen into disrepair and then into ruins. This seems a great shame, considering the castle's prime location.

I have found the information available about Ogmore Castle's history and different building stages to be rather vague and confusing. Perhaps the castle's story really is partly lost in the ever increasing mists of time, but despite this, its later additions haven't obscured the castle's earliest defensive features – the banks, ditches and stone walls, carefully built to deal with the vagaries of the tides.

We continued to walk around for a while, reluctant to leave such a peaceful, lovely site. The horses had really added to the feel-good factor and there were even a couple of sheep grazing in the castle's south-side ditch (whether they were meant to be there, I know not). It was easy to understand how the castle's significance had slowly declined as times changed, but a pity nonetheless.

View from the outer ward's south side (photo by Alan Santillo)

I was happy to learn of a legend associated with Ogmore, emanating from the 12th century and concerning Maurice de Londres. He was taking part in a hunt in woods surrounding the castle, which were full of deer. One day, a Welsh man of princely descent was caught aiming an arrow at a stag and was taken to the castle to be tortured in full view of the castle's dwellers. However, the daughter of Lord Ogmore was impressed by his noble and unrepentant bearing and pleaded for his release, reminding the Norman lords they had taken everything from the Welsh.

Since it was her birthday, her father agreed. She then asked that the Welsh be given some land in which they could hunt, at which her father decreed that this would be no more than the area she could walk barefoot from then until sunset. She did well, but brambles and thorns made her feet bleed and slowed her down.

Regardless, she covered a very reasonable area, with soldiers behind her marking her route. It became designated as common ground and to this day is known as Southerndown Common. I hope the noble Welsh man was suitably impressed.

This is not the only legend, as the ghost of The White Lady (*Y Ladi Wen*) was said to wander the area until one man had the courage to confront her. The spirit led him to a cauldron filled with gold that was hidden under a heavy stone in a tower of Ogmore Castle. He was allowed to take half the treasure, but later returned and took some more. This made the spirit angry, whereupon her fingers turned into claws and she attacked the man. He became gravely ill, but only died after confessing his greed. Afterwards, an ailment known as 'Y Ladi Wen's Revenge' was said to afflict anyone who died prior to disclosing hidden treasure. Bizarre…

Bizarre legends aside and without knowing its significance, we decided to move on to 12th-century Ewenny Priory, about two miles away and fairly easy to locate. We approached via a lane and parked, but to our surprise, our first sighting looked more like a castle than a priory, with a tower, gatehouse and fortified walls.

First sighting of Ewenny Priory (photo by Alan Santillo)

It was an intriguing place, if not a little confusing, but things became clear when we entered The Priory Church of St Michael within the grounds and purchased an inexpensive information booklet. EwennyPriory/Priordy Ewenni was indeed a 12th-century monastery of the Benedictine order and its history is fascinating.

It's considered possible that there was a pre-Norman church with a community at Ewenny, due to the fact that Ewenny is close to Via Julia Maritima, the great Roman military road, and also because Roman remains have been found in the village. A number of fragments from Celtic Christian crosses were built into the priory walls and are now located within the priory church. I so love a Celtic design…

Evidence exists in the 12th-century Book of Llandaff that there was a monastic cell on the site, dedicated to Eguenni, an early Welsh saint (and a pleasing insight into the name derivation of Ewenny/Ewenni). Documentary evidence also states that William de Londres had a church built at Ewenny, as well as the castle.

William de Londres had died by 1126 and was succeeded by his son Maurice, who seems to have been somewhat unscrupulous as far as religion was concerned. He was even threatened with excommunication by Pope Pius II if he failed to make appropriate reparations to the Church for his misdemeanours. He thus donated lands and churches and has been cited as the founder of Ewenny Priory.

The priory was situated at that time in such a volatile area that it was necessary for it to be fortified, despite being a religious building. It was definitely different as we wandered into the graveyard of the priory church, not quite knowing where to go. We picked our way over graves and peered into the sun at the building itself, trying to decipher what was what. There was a slightly eerie feel…

The eerie graveyard

The priory began with twelve Benedictine monks from the mother house at Gloucester Abbey, but unfortunately little is known of the following history and at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536-41), only three monks remained. Parts of the priory were converted into a private dwelling by Sir Edward Carne, a lawyer and diplomat, which was demolished in the early 19th century and replaced by Ewenny Priory House, a Georgian mansion.

Showing an original entrance arch (L) with a lurking dragon (R)

The house is still owned by the Turberville family (now Picton-Turbervill), who are descendants of Sir Edward Carne. The priory is not open to the public, except for the Church of St Michael, the village parish church, at the western part of the priory building. Cadw look after the priory and have carried out restoration work. It is a Grade I listed building and has been described as one of the finest fortified religious buildings in Britain. J M W Turner had even painted the priory during his third tour of Wales in 1795 – all this and we'd had no idea it even existed!

It was a pity the monastic buildings had been lost, but as we headed towards the church, a lurking dragon was spotted overhead on the entrance arch, which is similar to those at Llandaff Cathedral in Cardiff. It was a delightful detail, but there were more to come as we entered through the 16th-century porch and into the nave. It was interesting to find out that when the priory church was built, the nave of the parish church was separated from the monastic end by a pulpitum screen.

The pulpitum screen

The current pulpitum screen was added in 2006, the work of the Swansea-based international artist, Alexander Beleschenko. It was eye-catching, representing the resurrection of Christ and although opposite in its intrinsic modernity to its far more ancient surroundings, to my mind it absolutely enhanced the whole building.

Below it, there were two wooden doorways set in a 13th-century stone wall, the left one of which is used to enter into the monastic end of the priory church. Before doing so, we noticed some old, patterned floor tiles taken from the former chapel – it was paying to look both up and down as well as all around.

Once through the wooden doorway, we found ourselves in an astonishing space known as the crossing, which seemed to echo with the imprint of past lives. Stepping into the presbytery through a large opening in an oak screen was like stepping back in time. The upper half of the screen was 14th century and the lower half was early 16th century, but my eye was drawn to the stark space inside.

It may have appeared stark at first sight, but it was beautiful in its simplicity, with the vaulted ceiling, floor tiles and decorated windows set in deep stone apertures.

The presbytery (photo by Alan Santillo)

I was intrigued to discover more about the two types of ceiling vaulting, namely barrel-vaulting for the main part and crossed-rib-vaulting over the altar. The latter marked the inner sanctum area, acting as a conceptual canopy over the altar. Regarding the altar, it has been reconstructed using the original slab, with three of five consecration crosses incised on its surface. A consecration cross marked where a bishop had anointed the church with holy water or oil to consecrate it.

The altar table

There were more treasures in the presbytery, including not just the normal aumbry and piscina, but also a hagioscope that would have provided a view of the altar from a side chapel. To top it all, there was still some original wall painting to be seen around the east windows. To be fair, it isn't as clear as some we've seen, but even so, it's a great reminder how such churches in centuries gone by would have been richly decorated with images full of symbolism.

It was a quietly extraordinary place. On leaving the presbytery, the south transept also proved of great interest, mainly due to its collection of Celtic Christian stones and tomb stones of the priory's founders and priors. One stand-out tomb was that of Maurice de Londres, who died in 1166 (photo below on the right), while it was hard to know which of the stones were most significant. The part of one 11th-century cross (lower left on the photo below) had a spike downwards in imitation of the pointed base of early wooden crosses, found in Wales and Ireland.

Relics of the Celtic Christian era (photos by Alan Santillo)

There were many other features of the building itself that I didn't fully understand, but which nevertheless looked impressive and gave an idea of how the priory must have been a place of real import in its prime. I remain surprised that it was so understated as a place to visit, but perhaps that is actually in its favour!

Looking up from the south transept

As often happens, I was reluctant to leave such a notably historic place and could almost imagine the sound of the monks' plainsong. Maybe I was overdue for lunch?

We didn't leave immediately, but walked along the lane a short way to look more closely at the north gatehouse. It was indeed as defensive a gatehouse as those found at many castles. It rounded off our initial visit to Ogmore Castle very well indeed and although the castle and priory have a linked history, the priory is a definite stand-alone treasure and certainly worth a visit.

The north gatehouse (photo by Alan Santillo)