

RAGLAN CASTLE

Raglan, Monmouthshire, Wales NP15 2BT

18th March 2019

We were in Newport and had been deprived of castle visits all winter, so could hardly wait to set foot on fortified ground again. The weather was dry with a promise of lessening cloud and possible sunny intervals, so we looked forward to making use of our English Heritage membership cards that would give us discount to a Cadw castle (Cadw being a Welsh word meaning to keep or to protect).

The car park was within the castle grounds and the impressive looking castle beckoned us hopefully, but it was so cold! I don't know from which direction the deceptive weather was emanating, but the air felt like it had proceeded straight from the frozen wastelands. To top it all, I had no gloves. However, I did have pockets and a yearning for some hands-on history, so my pockets did good service when the hands-on history resulted in frozen fingers.



Approach to Raglan Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

It was obvious from the start that this visit would be in the nature of a reconnoître, because I had no idea of the background history and the sky was refusing to show any blue for best photographic purposes. I didn't mind, though, as the idea of a forthcoming summer visit felt good and Alan's camera was capable of producing much better skies than mine.

As we began our tour armed only with a leaflet, I soon realised from various information boards that I had no previous knowledge about the part this castle had played in history. I therefore made it my business to put this right upon returning home, so that on the anticipated future visit (when the sky would be blue with light, fluffy clouds, the air would be beautifully warm and there would be few people standing in the way of photo-taking), I would have a chance of properly appreciating what I was looking at.

As with so many castles, this one arose from the conflict and chaos after the Norman Invasion. Nobles known as Marcher lords were appointed by the King of England to guard the Welsh Marches, the name given to the imprecise border lands between England and Wales. Interestingly (to someone who loves language), a Marcher lord is the equivalent of a marquis in France, or a margrave in the Holy Roman Empire.

These powerful Norman-English barons were notoriously acquisitive, building castles to hold the land they seized and making alliances with local leaders to overcome fierce resistance from native Welsh princes. If it had been bad enough in England, it was even more complicated in Wales. It was, in fact, the Marcher lords of Usk who controlled the minor lordship of Raglan.

The first recorded lord was Walter Bloet, with Raglan being held by the Bloet family for 200 years until it was passed by marriage to William ap Thomas, an ambitious soldier. By the early 15th century, further alliances, invasions and castles had eventually brought Wales under English control. The launch of successful military campaigns by King Henry V in France opened a path to power, as well as prestige for those fortunate in battle and trade.

William ap Thomas was one such beneficiary, known as the Blue Knight of Gwent after having fought at the Battle of Agincourt with King Henry V in 1415. As well as being knighted for his service, William celebrated his growing status and wealth by building a grander home. The Marcher lord of Usk at that time, Richard of York, gave him permission to replace the old Bloet manor house with a castle - one of the last true castles to be built in Wales.

Work began in the 1430s with a programme of building that established the castle's basic shape, although most of it was subsequently built over. Only the south gatehouse, Fountain Court and the Great Tower date from that period, with the Great Tower later known as the Yellow Tower of Gwent. What with the Blue Knight and his Yellow Tower, I was beginning to sense shades of a colourful history...

After the death of William ap Thomas in 1445, the castle passed to his son William, who perhaps diplomatically dropped the Welsh version of his name in favour of the surname Herbert. Like his father, William Herbert (c.1423-1469) was a supporter of the House of York and known as 'Black William' for reasons unknown - but the colour reference was pleasing.

When the Wars of the Roses kicked off in 1455 and open war broke out between Lancastrians and Yorkists, William Herbert led the Yorkist forces in Wales, with much success. In 1461, he became 'Baron Herbert of Raglan' and in 1462, he was invested as a Knight of the Garter.

In 1468, he and his brother Richard advanced against the last Lancastrian stronghold in Wales, Harlech Castle, where Jasper Tudor (and his young nephew Henry, later King Henry VII) still resisted the Yorkists. After a siege, the strongly fortified castle surrendered and in 1468, William became Earl of Pembroke, which gave him control of Pembroke Castle.

As well as his military success, William expanded Raglan Castle with a second courtyard and the great gatehouse, also remodelling Fountain Court to make it worthy of receiving noble guests. However, a disagreement in 1469 with Lord Warwick (known as 'the Kingmaker') had disastrous consequences. Lord Warwick was in rebellion against King Edward IV and defeated him in the Battle of Edgecote Moor. Subsequently, William and his brother Richard were taken prisoner and executed by the Lancastrians. William was buried at Tintern Abbey.



Fountain Court (photo by Alan Santillo)

He was succeeded by his son William (c.1451-1491), although the earldom was suspended in 1479. Yorkist William married Mary Woodville, sister of the queen consort, Elizabeth Woodville, and they had one daughter named Elizabeth (c.1476-1507). After her father's death, Elizabeth inherited extensive lands in Wales, including Raglan Castle.

After the decisive Battle of Bosworth in 1485, the Tudor family from Wales had taken power in the person of King Henry VII. The Herbert family had been kind to young Henry Tudor when he was a boy at Raglan and as king, he repaid their kindness by arranging a good marriage for Elizabeth to Charles Somerset, the illegitimate son of a prominent Lancastrian.

The Somerset family was very successful and their wealth and prestige grew. Along with this, Raglan Castle benefitted in accordance with the current desire for palaces rather than fortresses. Over the decades, the hall was rebuilt with a fine roof and an impressive window. During the dissolution of the monasteries, lead from Tintern Abbey was used in the improvements and an elegant long gallery was also added, that looked out over an artificial lake and splendid gardens in the new Renaissance style.

The Somerset family owned two major castles in the area, Raglan and Chepstow, both of which seem to have been important status symbols, appearing prominently in paintings owned by the family. My castle appetite was further whetted...

Unfortunately, the English Civil War that broke out in 1642 eventually saw the demise of Raglan Castle. The elderly Henry Somerset (c.1577-1646) made considerable fortifications and huge monetary contributions to the Royalist cause, but by 1646 the castle was under siege from Parliamentarian forces led by Sir Thomas Fairfax.

After 11 weeks, Henry Somerset knew his cause was futile and surrendered - at least with the honour of Raglan castle being the last castle to fall in Wales. He was arrested and sent to Windsor Castle, where he died. Fairfax ordered the castle to be completely destroyed, but the building was very strong and proved impossible to completely demolish. It was therefore slighted so it could never be used as a military base again.

When Charles II was restored to power in 1660, the Somerset family regained their estates. However, the family was heavily in debt and Raglan Castle was damaged beyond repair. The family relocated to Badminton House in Gloucestershire, while the castle gradually turned from a demolition site, often plundered for its stone and timber, to an ivy-covered ruin.

In 1756, under the ownership of forward-looking Henry Somerset (1744-1803), the castle first became a tourist attraction. In 1938, it was handed over to the Commissioner of Works and today is administered by Cadw. Speaking of today, my fingers were still semi-frozen on and off, so after a really good exploration around the site with climbing and clambering appropriate to our somewhat advanced age, we bid a slightly frustrated farewell. However, we'll be back!



Semi-frozen posing (photo by Alan Santillo)