# ST QUENTIN'S CASTLE

Llanblethian, Cowbridge, Vale of Glamorgan, Wales CF71 7JT

***9th September 2024***

There seems to be a little uncertainty whether this castle is St Quentin's Castle, St Quintin's Castle, or according to Cadw (and they should know), Llanblethian Castle. However, the first option is easier to say and seems the most common, so I'll stick with that. It was a fine morning and so we visited St Quentin's Castle…

On arrival, the large and very substantial gatehouse was impossible to overlook, although the site itself seemed on the small side. We parked in an allotted area next to the castle, which was surrounded by a number of trees and a fair amount of vegetation in general, secluded within its own history while the rest of the world moved on. I began to wonder what history this understated site was retaining…

**Substantial gatehouse (L) & remains of north-east tower (R)**

Following the Norman invasion of England, the Glamorgan region of South Wales was conquered by Robert FitzHamon, the first Norman lord of Glamorgan, at the end of the 11th century. In around 1102, FitzHamon bequeathed the lordship of Talyfan, which included the manor of Llanblethian, to Herbert de St Quentin, without any of the feudal obligations usual at that time.

Since the St Quentins had disappeared from the scene before the present castle was begun, it's assumed that Herbert de Quentin had the original fortification built, thus giving the castle its name. It originally would have been a simple ringwork Norman-style defence with timber walls, a bank and a ditch, quite possibly built on the remains of Caer Dynnaf, an Iron Age hillfort. A rectangular stone keep was then built in the late 12th century, presumably to replace the timber structure.

The castle and lordship remained with the St Quentin family until 1233, when John St Quentin was overthrown from Llanblethian by Richard Siward from Talyfan, during the rebellion of Earl Richard Marshal (son of William Marshal, 1st Earl of Pembroke) against King Henry III (reign 1216-72). The rebellion ended with the death of Earl Richard Marshal in 1234, when Siward was reconciled to the king.

Siward was required to return the castle to John de St Quentin, but this never happened. He did not hold the castle for long, however, once the lordship of Glamorgan was taken over by Richard de Clare. In 1244, Siward allied himself with Hywel ap Maredudd, the Welsh Lord of Meisgyn, against Richard de Clare (full title Earl of Gloucester and Lord of Glamorgan), who had arranged a truce with the Welsh lord. Siward was outlawed and his lands confiscated. He died in 1248.

Llanblethian was absorbed into Richard de Clare's estates and the nearby borough of Cowbridge was founded in 1254, with the result that the importance of the castle increased. In 1257, Earl Richard gathered forces at Llanblethian in response to an attack on Llangynwyd Castle in Bridgend County Borough, but in the following years, there is no evidence of activity or construction at St Quentin's Castle. At this point, I can understand why it was called Llanblethian Castle!

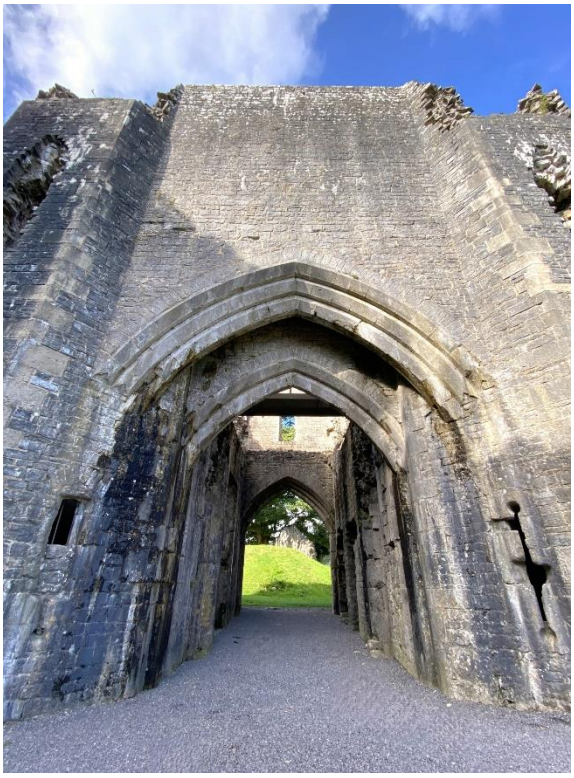
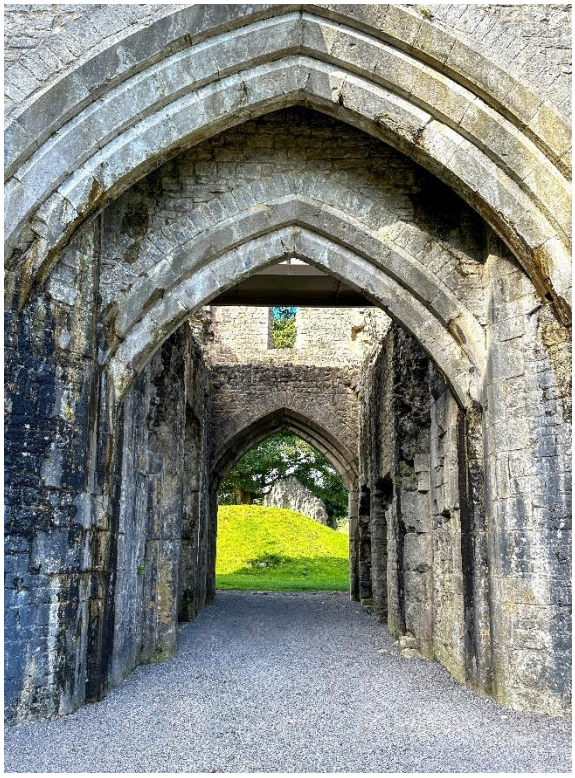
In 1262, Humphrey de Bohun, Earl of Hereford, occupied the castle for a year on behalf of the king and during that time, despite records of strong garrisons at the castles of Cardiff, Neath, Llangynwyd and Llantrisant, no mention was made of Llanblethian. It had not simply become a forgotten castle, though, as Earl Gilbert de Clare, 8th Earl of Gloucester (grandson of Earl Richard de Clare above) began to build the stone structure of the castle that remains in ruins today.

It seems this construction was interrupted when Earl Gilbert de Clare was killed at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. Although much of the castle's eastern end was probably complete when he died, historians believe the lack of inner courtyard buildings and the weak curtain wall indicate the castle was never fully finished.

Standing on high ground, a little less than 1 mile/1.5 kilometres from Cowbridge, the most notable legacy of Gilbert de Clare's castle is unavoidably the gatehouse that currently sits next to a road being passed daily by many people:

**The gatehouse and curtain wall** (photo by Alan Santillo)

The massive gatehouse was built with three floors and two half-hexagonal towers set quite a way forward of the curtain wall, with the backs of the towers edging the inner face of the wall. The passage had guardrooms with covering roofs and two portcullises, the slits of which can still be seen, plus door fittings.

**The gatehouse passage** (right photo by Alan Santillo)

Although the castle was probably never finished, the history wasn't over. In 1317, Llanblethian came into the hands of Hugh Despenser ('the Younger') through his marriage to Gilbert de Clare's sister, Eleanor, who was the niece of the new King Edward II (reign 1307-27). Hugh eventually became the notorious favourite of the equally notorious king and in the process was loathed by a vast number of the English nobility for his dubious behaviour and accused of widespread criminality.

In 1321-2, there was a baronial revolt, sometimes referred to as 'The Despenser War', when members of the nobility took action against King Edward II, forcing the two Hugh Despensers, father and son, into exile. During the uprising, however, Despenser castles had been forcibly taken and set on fire, including the castle at Llanblethian. Later, when the barons concerned were distracted by uprisings within their own lands, the Despensers returned and were reinstated.

An ensuing period of uncertainty and turmoil led to the unsavoury demise of both Hugh Despensers and the deposition and killing (also unsavoury) of King Edward II. Regardless of this upheaval, the castle was still kept in the Despenser family and passed on to Edward Despenser, son of the deceased Hugh Despenser the Younger. It appears the castle was restored at this time, as Edward is known to have died there, probably as a result of campaigns with the Black Prince in France.

Edward's successor was an underage son and so his lands were then in royal custody, although it's possible that his widow held the castle, as well as Talyfan and Cowbridge. By 1440, records show that the owner was Isabel Despenser, Countess of Warwick. She had been born in 1400, six months after her father, Thomas Despenser (son of Edward Despenser) was beheaded as punishment for taking part in a dastardly plot to assassinate King Henry IV (reign 1399-1413). It seems the Despenser family had a rebellious streak that led to dramatic deaths.

After Isabel died in 1439, the castle was owned through marriage and succession by Earls of Worcester, Warwick, Salisbury and the Duke of Gloucester. It was then confiscated by King Henry VII (reign 1485-1509) and awarded to his uncle, Jasper Tudor, Duke of Bedford, reverting to King Henry VIII (1509-47) on Jasper's death.

During the latter years of the 15th century into the mid-16th century, Llanblethian served as an administrative centre, with the castle's administrators acting as mayors of Cowbridge. The castle gatehouse was used as a local prison – and I can quite believe that the no-nonsense gatehouse served that purpose very well indeed. There is evidence that this practice was taking place in the 1530s, but no records refer to it being used for official purposes after this.

Like a number of castles around that time, St Quentin's/Llanblethian Castle fell into decline and by the 18th century, it was largely ruined. In spite of this, it appears the ground floor rooms of the gatehouse were adapted into a residential house that was occupied in the early 19th century, while by the end of the 19th century, it was being used as a cowshed. That gatehouse did not want to give up!

There seems to have been some controversy about the castle's upkeep in the 20th century, since the land was acquired in around 1964 by an owner who allegedly obstructed the efforts of concerned bodies, both governmental and voluntary, to ensure the monument was protected from possible development. However, the ruins were passed over to State care in 1994 and are now managed by Cadw.

We walked through the gatehouse that had seen interesting times and into the castle grounds, shaped as an irregular rectangle about 210 feet/64 metres by 180 feet/55 metres, surrounded by stone walls nearly 4 feet/120 centimetres thick.

**Through the gatehouse**

In the centre of the large space before us was an overgrown mound of what looked like semi-buried masonry, with some visible walls of about 8 feet/2.4 metres thick, presumed to be the remains of the stone late 12th-century keep. One of the main features, though, was the way some large trees had been allowed to encroach upon these remains, obscuring the detail and probably doing considerable damage with both their size and their root systems. I love trees, but this is a pity.

**Taken over by trees** (photo by Alan Santillo)

This castle seemed to be somewhat more of a mystery than many and wandering around, I tried not to feel frustrated by hardly any information – I think the only information panel I saw was at the gatehouse. On my perambulation, I noticed the top of what looked like an arched aperture of some kind, almost totally buried:

**Top of an arched aperture in the presumed keep?**

Wandering further away from the presumed keep, it was clear there were remains of structures beneath my feet, if the lumps and slightly protruding stonework was anything to go by. I began to have a fantasy that *Time Team* were about to arrive and carry out their investigations – or Professor Alice Roberts in league with a university – or anybody at all, really (with proper credentials, of course).

I can well understand that Cadw has limited resources to deal with all the castles and ancient sites and monuments in their care, but it would be so good if they could perhaps liaise with a keen amateur preservation trust, similar to what has been instigated at Snodhill Castle in Herefordshire. One can dream…

Fantasies over, I walked to the enclosure's north-west corner, where a small three-quarter round turret projected beyond the west and north curtain walls. The north curtain wall seemed the best surviving stretch, although like the others, it seems not to have been built to full height. Most of the original facing stone is no longer there except at the bottom. There were signs of a ditch, but alas, no information.

**The north curtain wall** (photo by Alan Santillo)

At the south-west corner there appeared to be parts of a tower, while the best defensive side is the southern one, which falls sharply to the River Thaw below. Walking to the south-east corner, the foundations of a semi-octagonal tower could be seen, before we completed the circular tour and returned to the gatehouse.

**South-east side of the gatehouse** (photo by Alan Santillo)

It felt as if the gatehouse needed further inspection and I'm glad we spent some time doing this. The masonry itself looked high quality, with local limestone and Sutton stone, the latter being found only in South Wales. The entrance passage was defended by a portcullis at the inner and outer ends, a murder slot and doors.

**The inner portcullis slot**

The excellent information panel in the gatehouse (and how I wished there were more) stated that this residential gatehouse compares with those at Caerphilly and North Wales. Originally, the outer face extended downwards into a deep rock-cut defensive ditch, which together with the gatehouse and the south-east and north-east towers, would have made the eastern approach difficult to infiltrate.

As ever, smaller details fascinated me and I was pleased by some arrowloops. The two guard chambers originally had four arrowloops each, but some were altered when the gatehouse was converted into a prison in the late 15$^{th}$ century. Then there had been two upper floors, the top and more secure one being residential.

**Arrowloop**

We had only seen one other person at the castle the whole time we were there, adding to the feeling that this castle is one of the more neglected ones. After leaving via the gatehouse, I looked back and this time took proper notice of the north-east tower remains. It was easy to see that it had once been a substantial rectangular structure, but is relegated nowadays to being either side of a path leading directly into the castle (rather than using the gatehouse). The now missing upper level had been linked by the curtain wall to the second floor of the gatehouse. Surely it deserves an information panel?

**Remains of the north-east tower**

It had been both an interesting and a rather frustrating visit, although discovering the history had definitely been worth the trouble. Hopefully one day there will be enough resources and the right people who will be only too pleased to take the trouble to give this castle the ongoing care it deserves. I mean, that gatehouse!