

Roche Castle – Site Visit

Paula Ellis



The first castle at Roch dates to around 1195 and would have been a simple wooden structure – part of the string of castles marking the 'Landsker', the border separating the Anglo-Norman 'English' settlers from the independent Welsh to the north (mostly descendants of Flemish mercenaries and their families, given land as payment for serving in the Norman William in the previous century). The first known holder of the castle was Adam de Rupe (or de la Roche), whose family were given lordship over the "Hundred of Roos". The original stone castle is now thought to have been built around 1210 and the D-shape takes its form from the rocky outcrop on which it sat – as a prime defensive site.

Stories tell that the choice of site was as a result of the prophesy of a 'wise woman' who said Adam would be killed by the bite of a viper ... so he shut himself up in the room at the top of the castle. When kindling was brought for his fire a viper was woken by the warmth and struck him – killing him, thereby fulfilling the prophesy! But his spirit did not rest easily as after he was buried his body kept disappearing from its grave during the night only to appear in the morning ... in the churchyard at Llangwm. His family returned him to Roch but the same thing happened again – and again – till his wife Blandina set watch at night and the guards reported that he had been carried away by "a multitude of dwarfs and flying serpents" ... so they decided perhaps he had better stay in Llangwm. The castle remained in del la Roche hands whilst other members of the family set off for new prospects in Ireland with one of the expeditionary forces and remained there – becoming the Viscounts Fermay.



The square section of the tower is thought to date from around 1314, after the original tower had been partly destroyed by lightning, but by the latter part of the 15th century it is reported as being in a ruinous and deserted state. By this time the direct male line had ended, when Thomas de la Roche died (1420) and the castle was inherited by his 2 daughters. The family of one of these, Elizabeth Longueville, then inherited the castle (but did not appear to live there) until 1601 when the castle and manor were purchased by the William Walter (of Rosmarket) from her descendants. Roch Castle then passed to his son Rowland, then his son (father of the fated Lucy Walter b. around 1630).



In 1642, when Lucy would have been around 11 years of age, Roch Castle was garrisoned by Royalist troops who held the castle against Cromwell's troops but eventually surrendered. The rocky outcrop was defensible in the 12th century but not against 17th century weaponry – it also suffered from a lack of an adequate water supply and its small size meant it could only be garrisoned by a small number of men in its defence. Later the same year the castle was captured back from the Parliamentarians ... till the following year when the Royalists were routed and the castle virtually destroyed. Lucy's father then spent the years till his death in 1650 battling with the government in his claims for settlement on the loss of the castle! Lucy's parents also spent most of the Civil War battling each other and at the time of the destruction of the castle were in London from where it seems Lucy was packed off to the Continent with Colonel Robert Sidney (a cousin). Sidney was sent to The Hague to be Chamberlain to Mary, Princess of Orange (and Prince Charles' sister) so

Lucy would (presumably) have become one of Mary's ladies-in-waiting. Charles himself 'escaped' from the strict supervision of his mother in Paris and joined his sister in The Hague and this is when he met – and wooed – 16 year-old Lucy. She produced Charles a son in 1649 (recognised by Charles as his

Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society

son and made Duke of Monmouth when his father was restored to the Crown) but she then produced a daughter in 1651 – when Charles was fighting for his crown in England - so he turned his attention to other mistresses but cared enough to provide her with a pension! In 1656 Lucy returned to England (in the company of her brother Justus) to claim an inheritance from her mother, but was thrown into the Tower as a Royalist spy then deported back to the continent. She finally died in Paris in 1658, aged just 28. Lucy's elder brother Richard inherited what was left of Roch Castle and the estates when their father died, and in 1657 he was elected High Sheriff of Pembrokeshire but never returned to Roch Castle, instead concentrating on the family's lands around Rosmarket. Lucy's younger brother Justus appears to have remained in London with their mother (till her death in 1657) and become a barrister.



After the damage done by the Parliamentary forces in 1645 Roch Castle became in a 'thoroughly ruinous state'. Roofs collapsed and the interior suffered decay from damp and the exposure to the elements. A report of the Cambrian Archaeological Society in 1864 noted that whilst the shell remained largely intact (though showing large fissures and holes in the E and N facades from 1645) no floors survived within the main tower. Eventually it was purchased by the first Viscount St David, Sir John Wynford Philipps in 1900 and he embarked on a massive rebuilding scheme to turn the ruin into his 'country seat' in North Pembrokeshire. To create a seat of sufficient splendour he had a new wing added – in the castellated style – including the 'new technology' of a steel frame and new concrete floors (creating problems for later restoration work as salty sand was used causing the steel beams to corrode). In 1954 the castle was purchased by the Honourable John Whitfield and members of the family lived there till 1965 when the castle was sold to Hollis MacLure Baker, and American furniture maker, who continued to restore the castle 'in the medieval style' until it was bought by William David Berry, who planned to make the castle his home. When he had to work abroad the plan was to let Roch Castle as holiday accommodation in order to help pay its way but eventually the Castle was purchased in 2008 by Keith Griffiths for the Griffiths-Roch Foundation – celebrating the fact that the castle eventually belongs to a Welshman!

The £6 million restoration job as a 6-bedroom luxury hotel has included wrapping the castle in plastic in order to allow the stonework to dry out before work could be commenced on the interiors.



Many of the original features that remained – including the narrow stairways that led to the upper floors of the castle tower - have been restored. The main hall is still referred to as the "court room" (as lords of the manor would have held their regular courts to settle local disputes – and the tower itself was used to house prisoners in the 14th century!) To the south side of the "court room" is the small chapel, or oratory, complete with vaulted ceiling. Both the charm and the challenge of the restoration was that not only are the rooms small but they



are all at different levels – or half-levels! Although the castle interior was completely rebuilt in the 1900s enough remained to reconstruct much of the original interior layout. The 'new wing' was built in 1902 but was designed to blend in with the older sections of the castle whilst the new elements bring modern style to reflect the castles recreation into its new role. Completed in 2013 the castle has become a *Dream Location* – receiving the 5-Star Gold Award from the AA and being named the Best 5-Star Hotel in Wales by Trivago, The Independent's 'The Big Six: British castle stay', The Guardian's '10 of the best cool

new hotels in Wales', The Sunday Times' 'Ultimate 100 British Hotels' list, The Times's Cool Hotel Guide, and was featured by BBC News, WalesOnline, Conde Nast Traveller and more.