

Castell Howell History



The little castle down the road, of which now, only the Motte or earthwork remains, was originally called Castell Wmphre. Later on it became Castell Howell, and this name was retained as it's occupants decided to relocate further up the valley where they built their dwelling on or near the site of the present farmhouse. When this happened the castle reverted to its original name of Castell Wmphre.

Castell Wmphre was one of several castles built as a part of the Norman occupation of Cardiganshire by Gilbert de Clare in 1110, in which he installed his companions as lords of dependent manors. Here his companion was a man called Humphrey - hence Castell Wmphre, just as in nearby Lampeter it was a Norman bridge-builder called Stephen - hence the name Llanbedr-pont-Stephan.

This victory of the Clares was, however, short-lived. On the death of Henry I in 1135, the Welsh took up arms and Richard Fitz Gilbert of Clare was ambushed and slain, and the two princes of North Wales or Gwynedd - two brothers - overran Cardiganshire and carved it up between them. The south part going to Owain Gwynedd, who two years later gave it to his son Hywell. So, in 1139 the name Castell Wmphre temporarily faded out; Castell Howell then embarked on a history that already has lasted over 800 years.

Hywell is better remembered in Wales as a poet than he is as a statesman and prince. Of his poetry, which is lyrical and dedicated to

beauty in women and his native North Wales, eight examples have survived. As a statesman, he fell victim to the Welsh habit of forever fighting his kinsmen; hence the house of Gwynedd weakened its hold on this Cardiganshire outpost. In 1150 Hywell succumbed to the three brother princes of South Wales or Deheubarth, and Castell Howell passed to their hands. The reign of Howell ab Owain Gwynedd had lasted barely twelve years; yet such is the Welsh love of poetry that his name is kept green.

By 1155 only the youngest of the three South Wales brothers, Rhys ap Gruffydd, was alive and Henry II had succeeded the weak Stephen on the English throne. In two years Rhys had to surrender his possessions, including Castell Howell, which reverted back into Norman hands and was re-built by Earl Roger in 1150. Yet later that summer Rhys sent his nephew to reduce Castell Howell, and fighting continued until Rhys was carried off to England in King Henry's train in 1163. His stay there was short, however, before returning to Wales with his wings somewhat clipped by the Treaty of Woodstock.

Then the Welsh miracle happened. In 1164 the princes of Wales - Gwynedd, Powys and Deheubarth - united in a national resistance that baffled King Henry. They repulsed him in the Ceiriog Valley, and secured for Wales's independence from England for a full hundred years. Rhys ap Gruffydd went on to take his place in Welsh history as the great Lord Rhys. He now turned his attention to the Norman's last stronghold in

Cardiganshire, the hitherto impregnable Cardigan Castle, and reduced it in 1165.

It was here that Rhys's son-in-law, Cadifor ap Dinawal, distinguished himself as the first one to scale the castle tower; his three ladders scaling the tower are a familiar feature in Welsh heraldry, and may still be seen on the sign of the occasional Welsh Inn (ie. our Castle bar). Cadifor's reward was to be made Lord of Castell Howell.

From him (and the Lord Rhys himself) are descended the numerous Lloyds of the county of Cardigan, who take pride in their three-ladder arms, and in Castell Howell as their ancestral home. Their surname of Lloyd was adopted in the 14th Century by Gwilym Lloyd, who (Meyrick says) was the first to build his house away from the original site of Castell Wmffre. His great grandson, Llewellyn Lloyd in the time of Henry VII, had an eldest son David, who represented Cardiganshire, as it's first recorded Member of Parliament in 1545. His second son, Rhys, founded the adjacent house and estate of Alltyroydn and his third son, Hugh, acquired the then dissolved Nunnery of Llanllyr. Of his sons, the second, Griffith, became the second Principal of Jesus College, Oxford, and the third, Thomas, became the Chancellor of St Davids and the father of the Judge and Royalist, Sir Marmaduke Lloyd of Maesyfelin. Llewellyn's fourth son, Gwion, founded the nearby house of Llanfechan, which in more recent times moulded the life that to this day, is lived in this district.

Marriage to an heiress removed the main branch of the Lloyds to Carmarthenshire about 1620; long after which Castell Howell was sold to the Alltyroddyn Lloyds and became a Farmhouse on their estate. It was tenanted at times by the Llanfechan family, members of which were by now, owner-occupiers of several Farms around Castell Howell. This was also a remarkable family, as instanced by David Lloyd, Brynlllefrith (1724 - 1779) - farmer, poet, versed in the Classics (Hebrew included), fluent speaker of French and Italian, one-time schoolmaster, minister of the local

Llwynrhydowen chapel, and in the opinion of Lord Aberdare, the only Welshman of his day to win a European reputation.

Castell Howell itself, re-entered Welsh history in 1782, when David Lloyd's co-minister and successor at Llwynrhydowen, David Davis (1745 - 1827), came to live in the current Farmhouse, where he founded an Academy which thrived for 30 years. "Davis Castell Howell" is still remembered in Wales, partly for the renown of the Academy and it's pupils; partly for his translation into Welsh of "Gray's Elegy", which some say excels the original, and partly for his strong conviction that in Politics and Religion, man should obey his own reason and conscience before any external authority; a view that brought him too close for his comfort to the ideals of the then raging French Revolution. One of his most talented pupils was Christmas Evans (1766 - 1838), who was born near the village of Llandysul, on Christmas day. His father was a shoemaker and died soon after the birth, so Christmas grew up as an illiterate farm laborer working on the farm at Castell Howell, in the care of a godless, cruel uncle. At the age of 17, he became a servant to the Rev. David Davies the Presbyterian Minister, in whose church he was converted during a revival meeting. He was taught to read and write at the Academy and began to take an interest in spiritual things, causing his former companions in sin to beat him severely and put out one of his eyes.

He became greatly influenced by the Baptists of Llandysul, and in 1790 joined the Baptist church at the age of 24 years. He was ordained and then began to travel the entire country of Wales, preaching in churches, in the coal mines, and in the fields. A remarkable manifestation of the Holy Spirit accompanied his ministry and revival of the Christian doctrine spread across Wales. Thousands of Christians began openly to witness for Christ, and to sing hymns publicly as testimony to their salvation. This resulted in the starting of the Welsh revival, and the revival fires burned and swept the Country for many years to follow.

In spite of his early disadvantages and personal disfigurement, Christmas Evans was a remarkably powerful preacher. To a natural aptitude for this calling, he united a nimble mind and an inquiring spirit. His character was simple, his piety genuine, and his faith fervently evangelical. His chief characteristic was a vivid and fluent imagination that was encouraged and developed in the Academy, which under the control of the Holy Spirit, earned for him the name of "The Bunyan of Wales."

What began with the Lloyds of Llanfechan and flourished with David Davis, came to a head under Gwilym Marles (1834 - 1879), again the Minister of Llwynrhydowen, schoolmaster, fervent Unitarian, and a militant opponent of what to him was the unholy trinity of landlord, steward and parson. His work for the Liberals in the General Election of 1868 evoked from Lloyd of Alltrodyn - a young man who was so different from his Llanfechan cousins - a regrettable over-reaction, in the form of cruel evictions, not only from the farms on the estate, but also from the Chapel itself. One farming couple and their three grown-up children left for America, only to lose the three children from fever on-route. They returned by the same ship and settled in a local small-holding, on which the wife, now demented, spent her few remaining days, wandering through the fields, calling to her children. Their plight is still vividly remembered as part of the price of freedom, in the pursuit of which Gwilym Marles wore himself out at the age of 45. Which is six years better than his great-nephew in our time, Dylan Marlais Thomas, in whose life and work there are influences only to be understood in the light of the History centred around Castell Howell.

Castell Wmphre Motte

Castell Wmphre occupies the extremity of a low but steep-sided spur formed by a minor tributary of the Clettwr Fach. The tip of the spur which overhangs the valley road and the Clettwr river was scarped and shaped to form a formidable Motte rising over 50 feet above the riverside meadows below. The mound was cut off from the higher ground to the East by a steep sided ditch of "V" section and the soil from this was apparently used to heighten the already lofty mound. There are still slight traces of a small bean shaped Bailey defended on the South by a slight semi-circular scarp and beam, and on the East by the remains of a levelled rampart and filled-in ditch. The ground rises well beyond the height of the Motte a short distance to the East where the approach is fairly level. On the North and West, the slope down to the brook, is precipitous, and on the South, reasonably steep, but the situation is not a particularly strong one. On the summit of the Motte is a deep rectangular depression 14 feet wide by 28 feet long, but no trace of any stonework. The hollow may represent a fairly recent excavation in search of "Treasure." The Motte and ditch and part of the Bailey, stand in a small square enclosure, which is covered with small trees, bushes, bracken and brambles so as to be almost impenetrable. An area on the spur, immediately to the East of the above described defences, has signs of artificial scarping on the North side and may represent the site of an outer Bailey, all other traces of which have disappeared.



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