



Pembrokeshire Historical Society

Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Sir Penfro

Journal index



ROCH CASTLE

By James Meek

Roch Castle is a substantial stone tower perched high on an outcrop of igneous rock in the village of Roch in west Pembrokeshire. It is an imposing structure with clear views all around. It has been an important strategic stronghold since at least the 12th century, and the rock itself is very likely to have been a focus for activity back into the prehistoric period.

The story of the castle at Roch begins with Flemish migrants who were granted lands in the commote of Rhos in the first decade of the twelfth century following the Anglo-Norman Conquest. Roch lies at the northern end of the Landsker Line, the boundary of the Anglo-Norman settlers to the southwest and the native Welsh to the east. A defended settlement associated with the Flemish migrants must have been present here from the early twelfth century, although the form of any such structure is unknown. The first castle is attributed to Adam de Rupe (the grandson of one of the first Flemish settlers, Godbert the Fleming), who was born in around 1160 AD. Adam de Rupe founded Pill Priory at Milford Haven and also the church at Roch. The name of 'de Rupe', taken from the Latin for rock, and the French 'de la Roch' (of the Rock) were both used for the Flemish descendants of Godbert the Fleming, directly referencing the rocky outcrop on which the castle sits.

The original D-shaped tower, the earliest element of Roch Castle, would appear to have been dictated by the shape of the rock on which it was built. The date of the tower is

questionable, previously being attributed to the latter part of the thirteenth century due to its similarity to native Welsh D-shaped towers of this date. The castles of the Welsh princes were built as strongholds against the Anglo-Norman invaders. Roch Castle has no association with the native Welsh, and it is suggested by the author that the castle is far more likely to date from the early years of the thirteenth century, constructed during the ownership of Adam de Rupe. This would put it roughly contemporary with the early elements of Pill Priory and also the foundation of St Mary's in Roch (both stone constructions).

Stone elements dating to the early years of the thirteenth century are recorded at many of the larger stone castles on the Landsker Line, such as Wiston, Llawhaden and Laugharne. These castles were larger than Roch and are documented as having a far more turbulent history, resulting in the castles being significantly damaged from Welsh raids. Unlike Roch, (and Wiston) these examples were also significantly extended and rebuilt into the sixteenth century, resulting in little of the original early thirteenth century fabric surviving. It is suggested that the significance of Roch as a Flemish defended stronghold diminishes quite rapidly, possibly indicating relative calm between the Welsh and the de la Roche dynasty.

The D-shaped tower contained at least three storeys: a basement, first storey hall and second storey with chambers. Slight indications of a possible timber-built third storey have been recorded within the building. The basement level lies directly upon the rocky outcrop, which projects above floor level in the southern part of this room. There is no indication of an entrance at this level, although the northern wall of the D-shaped tower has been significantly rebuilt and altered, which may have removed any evidence. Stairs within the width of the wall are present on the eastern side of the castle which provided access to this level. The first storey presumably contained a large hall, with stairs in the width of the apsidal end of the building providing access to the upper storeys. It is thought likely that the main entrance to the castle was located in the northern wall of the tower at this level, accessed from an external timber built stair, but further analysis of the evidence is needed.

In 1314 the tower is recorded in an inquisition of Edward III as having been 'shattered' when struck by lightning. The damage must have been substantial for it to be included in the inquisition. From the recording works undertaken at the castle, it seems likely that the square extension to the tower on its southeastern side and associated stairs to the east were built as part of the repairs after this date. The square tower provided small chambers on three levels, the lowest sitting directly upon the rocky outcrop, which corresponded roughly with the first storey of the original castle. The eastern stair extension provided a revised internal stair arrangement, presumably necessitated by the lightning strike having compromised the original stair layout within the thickness of the walls of the castle in this area. These accessed the chambers of the new square tower and the various floors within the original D-shaped tower. The walls of the square tower are of only c.0.6m in thickness, compared to c.1.6m for those of the original D-shaped tower. It is considered that this clearly demonstrates that the defensive role of the castle had diminished and it was now being used more as a symbol of the status of

the owners. Large windows in the straight walls of the west, north and east walls of the castle may have been inserted at this time, replacing smaller openings, creating a well lit main hall.

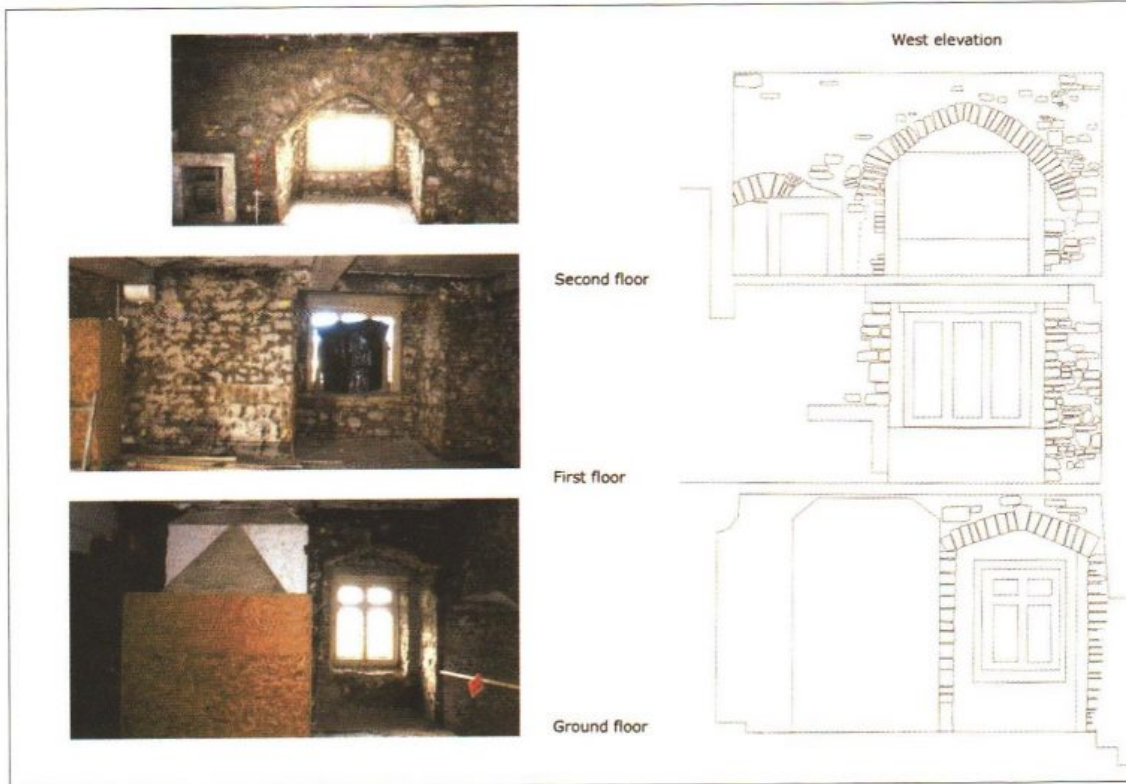
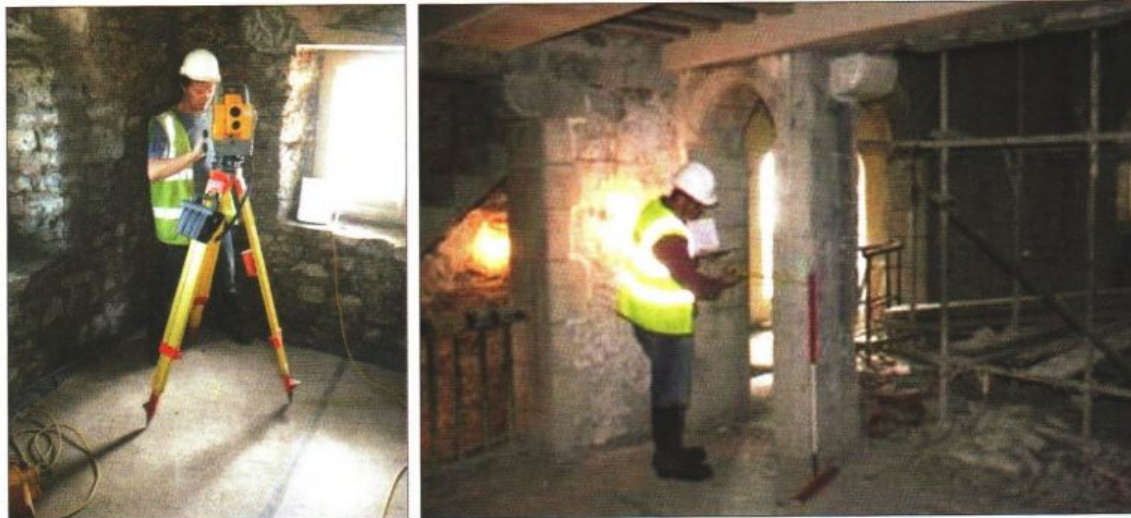
By the latter part of the fifteenth century the castle is recorded as being in a ruinous and deserted state. In 1601 the castle was sold to William Walter of Trefan, and the Walter family retained ownership of the castle until after the Civil War. In the winter of 1643 it was garrisoned by Royalists forces, but by 27th February of that year it had been taken by the Parliamentarians. It was recaptured by Royalists on the 7th July before being recaptured by the Parliamentarians in 1645. The castle sustained damage from cannon fire during the Civil War and does not appear to have been repaired, remaining a ruin to the end of the nineteenth century.

In 1864 a visit to the site by the Cambrian Archaeological Association was documented by Mr. G. T. Clarke and a description of the castle was published in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* in 1865. It is noted that the main shell of the tower survived substantially intact, but that no upper floors survived within the main tower. The remains of staircases were visible within the thickness walls of the walls, with only the lower staircase still accessible. The internal walls of the stairs on the upper floors had collapsed. The article was accompanied by sketches of the ruined castle, showing large fissures and holes in its eastern and northern facades. These had presumably been as a result of damage during the Civil War and subsequent neglect of the building.

The castle was purchased by Sir John Wynford Philips in 1899, who was later to become Viscount St.Davids. He instigated large-scale restoration works in the first two decades of the twentieth century, including the addition of new floor levels within the main tower, which differ from the original levels, new stairs and the addition of a number of internal divisions to create new rooms. Between 1904 and 1910 a two storey extension was added to the north of the castle, which was raised to 3 storeys by 1920. Access from the original tower to the extension utilised the large fissure in the north wall of the castle as indicated on the 1865 sketches. A new entrance into the basement of the castle was added on the eastern side, again utilising an area of damage to the castle wall.

Roch Castle was purchased by the Griffiths-Roch foundation in 2009, and a new phase of restoration carried out. The repairs and alterations undertaken at the castle have been designed to ensure that the surviving medieval fabric is protected and consolidated. New additions to the structure have been designed with reversibility in mind, so that if necessary the new components could be removed with minimum disruption to earlier fabric. The external repair of the medieval fabric has used matching pennant sandstones and extensive use of hydraulic lime mortars. Internally, the masonry walls have been plastered with hemp lime plaster. The removal of inappropriate cement renders and pointing and replacement with lime mortars is beneficial to the long-term survival of the castle. Throughout the restoration works Dyfed Archaeological Trust has been undertaking a programme of building recording, through photographic, written, hand drawn and surveyed record, and a report will be

produced. The Trust has also provided advice to the architects and site contractors throughout the project.



Surveying in Roch Castle

The renovated castle will be operated by The Retreats Group as a 5 star Corporate Retreat alongside several other properties held by the Griffiths-Roch Foundation, including Twr Y Felin Hotel and Penrhiw Priory Retreat. Although the building will remain in private hands, it will still be a highly visible landmark in the locale. The history of the castle, photographs and further information have been made available on the Retreats Group website. The archaeological and building recording works undertaken by the Dyfed Archaeological Trust will also be available for the general public to understand more about the history and development of the castle, as well as the care and resources that have been put into its restoration. The anticipated restoration costs inclusive of purchase price and consultancy fees will be 6 million pounds.