

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

Grosmont Castle, Skenfrith Castle and Church, Pembroke Castle

by M. E. Bagnall-Oakley
1895-97, Vol. 20, 88-99

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GROSMONT CASTLE.

BY MRS. BAGNALL-OAKELEY.

THE history of Grosmont must be taken with that of Skenfrith and Llantilio or White Castle, which together form the celebrated "Trilateral" of Monmouthshire. The three castles appear to have been united from a very early period, and afterwards, with the strongholds of Old Castle and Longtown, formed a most important line of defence against the Welsh. In the rear of these Monnow castles were Brecon, Tretower, Crickhowel, and Abergavenny. Lower down the stream was New Castle; while the junction of the Monnow and the Wye were defended by Monmouth Castle, and the town beneath its protection. It is quite clear that early strongholds existed at Grosmont, Skenfrith, and White Castle long before the present castles were built, although it is difficult to speak with any certainty as to the age of these earthworks. They were, however, *post Roman*, and earlier than the Norman invasion, and were probably the strongholds of Welsh or Romano-British Chieftains.

The early moated mound upon which Grosmont Castle stands was probably surmounted by palisadings without any stone erections, and it must have been of considerable age to have been solid enough to sustain the weight of the massive structure erected upon it, but at what date the first stone castle was built is not known. The *Pipe Roll* of the first year of King John, A.D. 1199, shows that they then belonged to the King, but five years later he granted the three castles to be held by William de Breos, Lord of Abergavenny, "in the same manner as they

had been held by Hubert de Burgh; and twenty marks were allowed to Geoffrey, Earl of Essex, which he had paid for fortifying them." Probably no part of the existing buildings are older than this time. John de Monmouth, a powerful baron, who in 1215 was Constable of the Castle of St. Briavel's, had some claim upon these castles, which was admitted by the King; but in 1219 De Burgh was again ordered to have seisin of the castles, forfeited by the defection of William or Reginald de Breos.

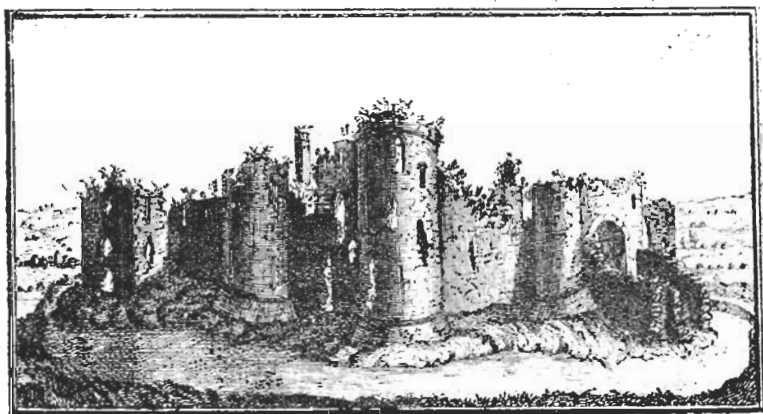
There is tolerably conclusive evidence that this castle was being built or enlarged in 1227 (11th Hen. III.), for the King on the 29th March of that year made De Burgh a present of a hundred oak trees towards this work; but it is doubtful how much of the castle was completed by him, for in the very next year the King again seized the castles, and gave them to John de Braose, who had married Margaret, a daughter of Prince Llewellyn. After his death in 1232 the King again seized the castles, and gave them into the custody of Peter Ryval to hold till Margaret the widow of de Braose should deliver up her two sons, William and John, which probably the lady refused, as none of the family ever had anything to do with the property afterwards.

The former owner, Hubert de Burgh, who had fallen into disgrace, and been imprisoned at Devizes, had now made his escape (1232), and had joined Richard Marshall and Llewellyn in the marches in the well-known war against the King. They seem to have besieged Grosmont Castle, for Dugdale¹ says: "The King came with a great army and raised the siege. Subsequently, however, the royal troops met with a disaster, and the King having marched against the insurgents, his provisions were cut off, and being unable to carry out his design, he retreated to Grosmont, and encamped his army in the vicinity of the castle. During the night a large party of the enemy's horse surprised the King's troops asleep in the trenches, and carried away 500 horses, besides waggons, provisions, and much treasure."

¹ Dugdale, vol. i., p. 604.

In 1240 De Burgh surrendered his right to the castles, and made his peace with the King, who in 1267 gave them to his son Edmund Crouchback, Earl of Lancaster, who resided at Grosmont, and whose grandson was known as Henry de Grosmont from having been born here.

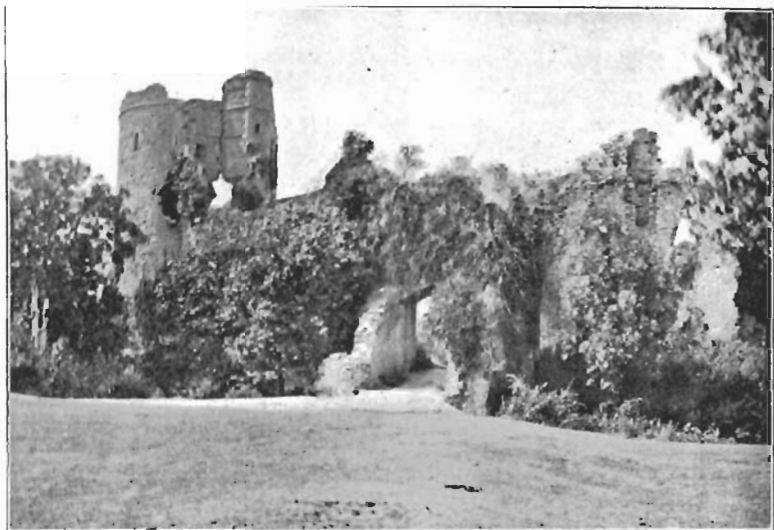
The last historical event recorded of Grosmont was the defeat of Owen Glyndwr by Henry V., when Prince of Wales in 1405. Glyndwr having retreated to Usk was again defeated by the Prince. These defeats were disastrous to the cause of Glyndwr, though the war continued till two years after Henry V. ascended the throne. After the accession of Edward IV. Grosmont, with other Lancastrian castles, were dismantled, and were returned as ruinous time out of mind in the reign of James I.



[From an old print.]

GROSMONT CASTLE.

The Castle of Grosmont is composed of a court of irregular plan, entered by a gate-house (if it can be so described) which presents two lateral cheeks of wall projecting on either side of the bridge, and forming a covered way; the pointed vault of the entrance is broken (it is represented as entire in Coxe's sketch), but there remain traces of the grooves for the portcullis, and the two holes which received the large wooden bar for fastening the gate.



From a Photograph by Mr. Tudor Williams.

Entrance to Grosmont Castle.



From a Photograph by Mr. Tudor Williams.

Chimney in Grosmont Castle.

GROSMONT CASTLE.

Outside the ditch, to the East and South, is a large demi-lune, or platform of earth, upon which are traces of walls, and a defence of the nature of a Barbican. On the left of the entrance the curtain extends to the South-East drum tower, which appears to have been low, and altered and enlarged on the side of the court, and at the time raised two or three stories.

From this tower a strong curtain wall extends to the South-West tower, which is broken down towards the court. Between these two towers were buildings, probably barracks: Outside of the West curtain are some buildings in a very ruinous condition, but in these was the fireplace, the flue of which rises in an elegant octagonal chimney shaft. On the right of the court is the shell of the Great Hall, 80 ft. by 27 ft., which is very large for so small a castle. The timber floor was 6 ft. above the level of the court, and below this is a spacious apartment with a fireplace in its East wall. There are three windows at each end of the Great Hall and four on each side, but probably some of them gave light to a with-drawing room. The fireplace on the North side probably marks the centre of the hall.

Whatever may have been its earlier history, there are no buildings remaining which were erected before the reign of Henry III. The later additions are of Decorated style, and were probably added in the reign of Edward I. by Henry de Grosmont who succeeded his father in 1345, and was afterwards created Duke of Lancaster, his predecessors having been simply earls.

The possessions of the Dukes of Lancaster were afterwards merged in the Crown, and the three castles so continued till they were purchased by the Duke of Beaufort in the early part of the present century.

Grosmont is an ancient borough and market town, but the Charter, which was in possession of the Corporation in the early part of this century, is now lost. The market is disused, but the market hall was rebuilt some years ago. The place is now only a village. In 1405 the forces of

Owen Glendower were here defeated by Prince Henry after having burnt the town. One account says 500 houses were destroyed.

The base of the great cross still remains under the market house. It is now turned upside down, but it shows that it was intended to carry a shaft and cross of large dimensions, and is of late Decorated period.

It would be wrong to close this short account of Gros-mont without referring to the celebrated John of Kent or "Jackey Kent," as he was called by the villagers. This wonderful personage is made responsible for all sorts of supernatural performances, for it is said that he made a compact with the Devil, and obtained his help in his undertakings. His most useful work was the construction in one night of the bridge over the Monnow, leading to Kenchurch, and a cellar at Kenchurch House used to be shown as the place where he kept horses on which he could fly through the air with lightning speed. Tradition says he was a Franciscan monk remarkable for his learning, who, in the age of ignorance in which he lived, was looked upon as a necromancer.

The old half-finished effigy now in the church used to be considered as John of Kent's, and the story went that he sold his soul to the Devil, and that whether he was buried inside or outside of the church, the Devil was to have his body. Being buried under the church wall, he contrived to outwit the Power of Evil, and this effigy, which formerly lay alongside of the North side of the chancel, was supposed to show the place of his interment.¹

¹ This half-finished effigy represents a Knight in surcoat, with heater-shaped shield, and was probably intended for one of the early Lords of the Castle.



From a Sketch by Mrs. Bagnall-Oakeley.

SKENFRITH CASTLE.

SKENFRITH CASTLE AND CHURCH.

BY MRS. BAGNALL-OAKELEY.

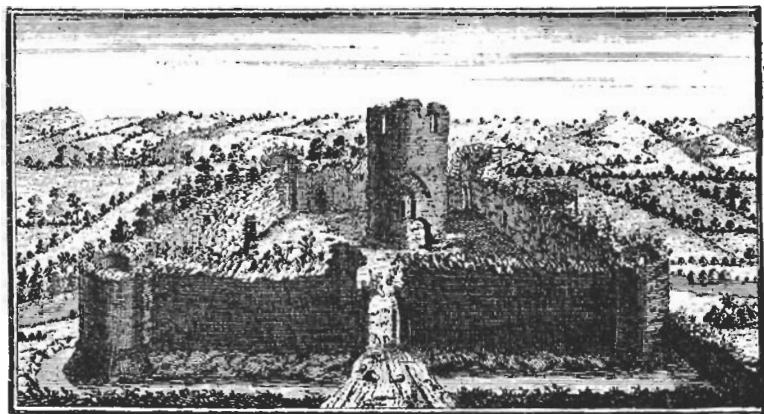
SKENFRITH CASTLE.

SKENFRITH Castle stands upon the right bank of the deep valley of the Monnow, about six miles from Monmouth and four from Grosmont, and it is placed at a point where several valleys unite. All I can find of its history has been told you at Grosmont, with which Castle and White Castle it seems always to have been connected. Why Skenfrith, the smaller of the three castles, should have given its name to the Hundred I am unable to explain.

The mound upon which the keep stands is one of those early defences of which it is difficult to speak with any certainty, but which exist in large numbers not only in this part of the country, but in Devonshire, Cornwall, Kent, North and South Wales, and in most parts of the kingdom. When the Normans invaded the country they found these mounds ready to hand, and upon them they erected stone keeps such as may be seen here, or the larger walled enclosures which are known as shell keeps, such as the one at White Castle and Berkeley. It is said that the stronghold of Skenfrith was held by Baçh, son of Cadivor ap Gwaethvoed, at the time of the Norman Conquest, who probably obtained possession of it during the victorious campaign of Caradoc ap Griffith, in 1065.

Of the history of Skenfrith from that time till the 13th century nothing is known, but it seems to have been erected about 1200, at the same time or a trifle earlier than Grosmont. It appears that Henry III. visited Skenfrith on the 19th August, 1220, and again in 1222 he was here

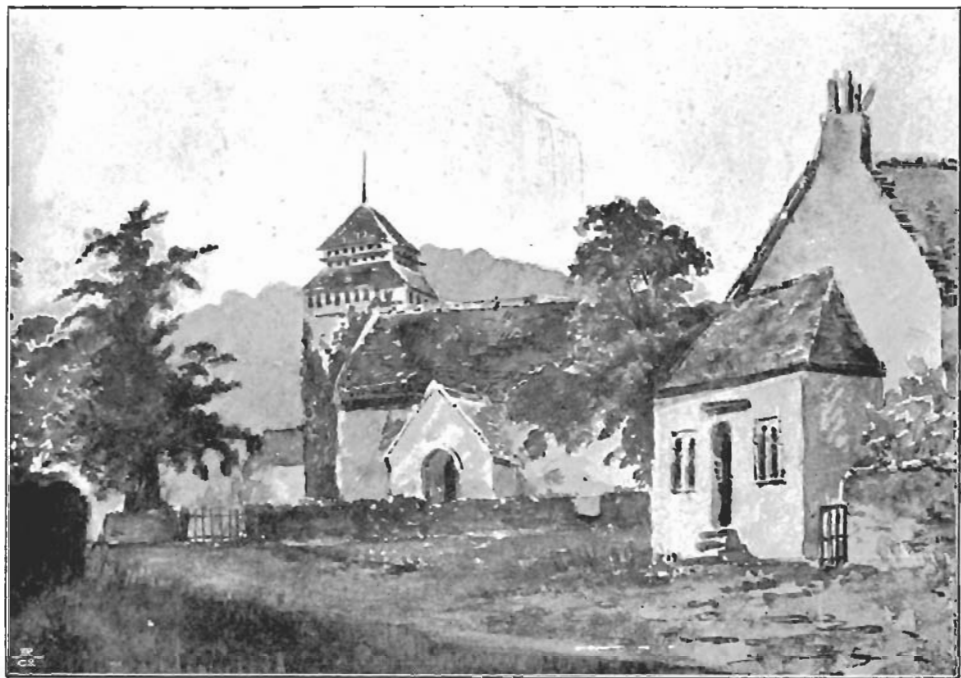
for several days together, probably for the purpose of hunting, for there are no arrangements in this Castle suitable for a state visit of Royalty; but bad as was the accommodation at this Castle we, must conclude it was better than was afforded by either Grosmont or White Castle, as the King chose it for his resting place. The form of Skenfrith Castle is a trapezium, of which the Northern and Southern sides are 74 yards and 71 yards, and the Eastern and Western are



[From an old print.]

SKENFRITH CASTLE.

31 yards and 59 yards. Within this area, and upon the mound before referred to, stands the keep, a cylindrical tower, with a battering base, which is entirely unconnected with the curtain walls, and is at present about 40 feet high, 36 feet in diameter, with walls 5 or 6 feet thick. The present entrance is on the West by a doorway of 5 feet 6 inches opening, but the masonry and the absence of bar holes show that this doorway is not original, and the only original entrance is on the first floor by a door nearly over the lower entrance; there is no trace of a portcullis. The basement chamber is circular, 22 feet 4 inches in diameter, and on the level of the ground, and the principal chamber on the first floor is the same size. In the second floor there are two



From a Sketch by Mrs. Bagnall-Oakeley.

SKENFRITH CHURCH.

window openings with round heads. There is a corbel of Decorated work in this chamber.

The curtain wall of the single court is 8 feet thick and from 30 to 40 feet high externally. The four angle towers are cylindrical, 11 feet internal diameter, with walls 8 feet thick, and they have no internal projection. Each tower is entered by a door 3 feet wide. The floors were of timber, and no staircases now remain. Some of the arches are round-headed, others are pointed and the loops are square. There is a half-round buttress tower in the South front, with no internal projection, and just opposite this tower in the North wall is a doorway, the pointed arch of which is a little above the level of the court. As the sill of this door must be just above the level of the Monnow, it was probably connected with it by a short canal for boats to come up. There is no trace of a regular gatehouse to this court, but a part of the centre of the West wall has been rebuilt in an inferior manner, and probably the entrance was at this point (Buck's view, taken 1732, shows a broken arch and windows over at this spot). It is remarkable that there are no mural chambers, and no garderobes in this castle, but it was evidently built only to contain a small garrison and not as a private residence. There is no trace of a chapel, hall, or kitchen, and probably whatever lodgings were required were of timber with roofs resting against the walls. After the time of Henry de Grosmont, in the reign of Edward I., Grosmont seems to have been enlarged, and to have become the residential castle of the Duke of Lancaster in this part of the country, after which there is little mention of Skenfrith, and it was probably dismantled by the Earl of Pembroke in the reign of Edward IV., and gradually fell to decay, as it was returned as "ruinous time out of mind" in the reign of James I.

SKENFRITH CHURCH.

This large and interesting church was probably erected in the 13th century and about the same time as the castle.

The arcading between the North aisle and nave may be of this period, as also a fine coffin lid in the floor of the aisle. The North aisle is of Decorated work, and the great size of the stones in the outer wall of this aisle should be noticed. The tower is surmounted by an open lantern of timber, locally known as a "pigeon house tower," and is a very good example of this local style. There seems to have been a restoration of the church in 1661. The roof over the South aisle has this date on it, and the font is of the same period. A Pre-Reformation cope belongs to this church, which is a good example of the embroidery of the 15th century.

There is a fine tomb against the South wall to the memory of John Morgan, Esq., who died 1557, and of Ann his wife, who died 1564. He was steward of the Duchy of Lancaster, and represented the Monmouthshire Boroughs in 1553 and 1554. The effigies of this lady and gentleman, in low relief upon the slab, are worthy of notice as showing every detail of the costume of the period in which they lived.



From a Photograph by Mr. Tudor Williams.

PEMBRIDGE CASTLE.

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By Mrs. BAGNALL-OAKELEY.

It is somewhat singular that the Castle of Pembridge, which is within three miles of Skenfrith, should never be mentioned in connection with it, though these castles must have been erected within a few years of each other, and, in fact, the Monnow Castles had become ruinous before any historical event is recorded of Pembridge.

Contrary to usual custom, Pembridge seems to have derived its name from its original builder, for at the beginning of the thirteenth century Ralph de Pembridge was settled at Welsh Newton, and probably, to show his connection with the ancient family of which he was a member, he called his residence Pembridge's Castle, although it does not appear to have been in any way connected with the Manor of Pembridge in Herefordshire, but to have formed part of the Manor of Newland in Gloucestershire from a very early period. Ralph de Pembridge died before 1219; but I am unable to say what relationship existed between him and the main line of the family which was seated at Tong Castle, Shropshire. The Pembridges of Clehonger, Herefordshire, seem to have been of the same family as those of Newland, for Henry de Pembridge, the elder, who had lands in Clehonger, temp. Edw. I., passed the Manor of Newland by fine to Henry de Pembridge, junior, and it was afterwards settled on his brother, Richard, in case of failure of issue. This Richard succeeded him, and died before 1346. He left an only child, Henry, who was fifteen years old at his father's death, and died the following October, his heirs being Sir Richard Burley and

Sir Thomas Barre, the children of Sir Richard's two married sisters.

Newland, including Pembridge Castle, fell to the share of Sir Richard Burley, a Knight of the Garter and a distinguished soldier. He left no issue, and his estates devolved on his brother William, who died *s.p.* in 1388. Roger Burley, the next brother, also died without leaving a son, and the Manor of Burley and other lands devolved to Thos. Hopton, who had married the only daughter of Sir John Burley. Newland, however, with Pembridge Castle, was in the hands of Thos. Beaufort, Duke of Exeter, third son of John of Gaunt, at his death in 1427 when he is stated to have held it of Richard, Duke of York, under age, and in custody of the King and of the honour of Wigmore. From this time there are different accounts of the owners of the Manor. Gough says that it was held by the Knights Hospitallers, whose preceptory was at Garway, only a mile or two distant, and that at the Dissolution it was granted to one Baynham of Newland, who was attainted in the second year of Elizabeth. It was then sold to David Baker, who sold it to Sir Walter Pye, and the last Sir Walter sold it to George Kemble, who made it habitable in 1675.

The fortress is still in fairly good condition, and is a quadrangular structure about forty-five yards from North to South, and thirty-five yards from East to West. The entrance is, on the South side, defended by two towers of unequal size, the smaller one standing on the South-East angle of the enclosure. Access to the courtyard is gained through a dark vaulted passage thirty-three feet long, in which two, if not three gates may be traced with machicolations between them, and the grooves of the portcullises. The drawbridge when drawn up fitted the space between the entrance towers; but it no longer exists, and this part of the moat is filled up. There was a considerable moat which went all round the castle. In the courtyard at the left side a door between two square-headed windows leads to what was probably the kitchen, judging by the size of the fire-

place. Adjoining this at the South-West corner is the keep tower, the basement of which is now used as a cellar, and the three floors are all gone. The present kitchen and parlour were once the great hall, and the staircase in the projecting turret is, no doubt, original. The North-West angle is supported by a very singular turret-like buttress, and the tower in the opposite angle is still more curious. Its ground-plan is a quarter of a circle of eleven feet radius with straight sides. There are several loop-holes in the north wall, which are evidently of late date: no doubt made when the Castle was an outpost of the Royalist garrison of Monmouth. It suffered severely in the campaign of 1644, when it was besieged by Colonel Massie, and "at last the garrison having no further subsistence were enforced to surrender."

The position of this Castle after the introduction of gunpowder was essentially weak, as it is commanded by the rising ground on the East side. Some earthworks on the lower side of the moat are curious, and may have been constructed in order to prevent missiles being sent through the windows.

The last episode to be related about this Castle is a sad one. The family of Kemble, who bought it from Sir Walter Pye, were members of the Roman Catholic Church, and at the top of the keep used to be seen a desecrated chapel, where mass was wont to be celebrated. An aged priest of this family was betrayed and discovered at the altar; he was arrested by a magistrate, Capt. Scudamore, of Kentchurch, and taken to Hereford, where he was tried and executed, August 22nd, 1679, one of the last martyrs of that intolerant age. It is said that as a last favour he asked to be allowed to smoke his pipe on the way to execution, and to this day the last pipe before a party separates is called in Herefordshire "Kemble's pipe." John Kemble's body rests near the base of the old cross in Welsh Newton Churchyard, where pilgrimages are still made on the day of his death.