

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

Caerphilly Castle

by J. S. Corbett
1908, Vol. 31, 261-269

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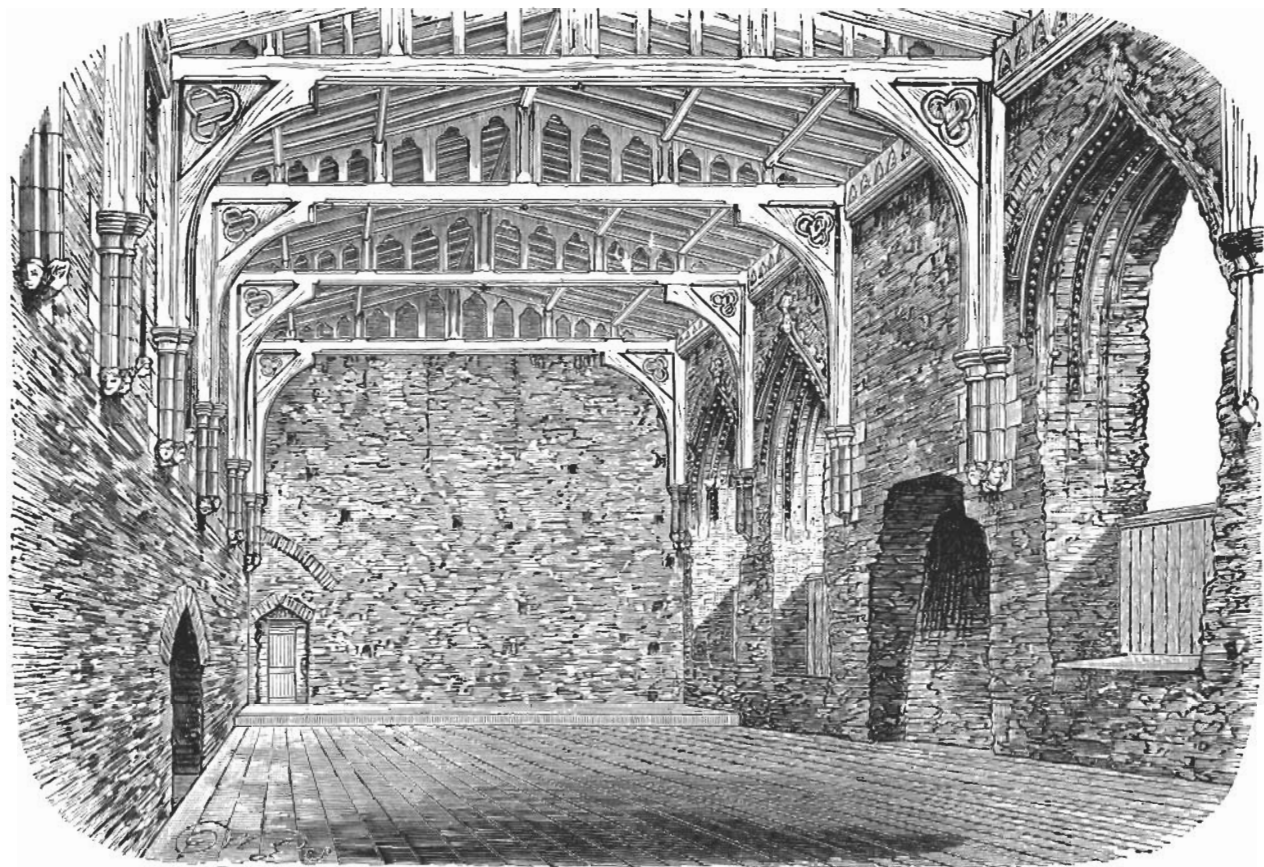
CAERPHILLY CASTLE.

By JOHN STUART CORBETT.

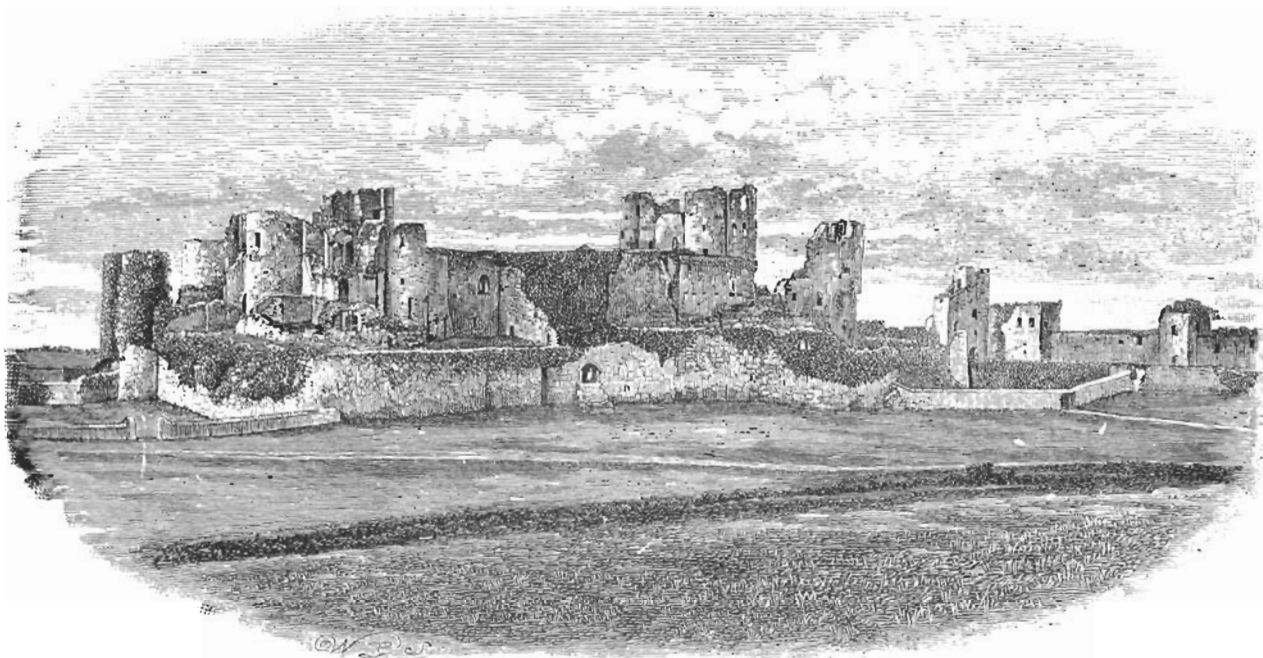
THE derivation of the name of Caerphilly is not known with any certainty, though many different conjectures, some of which can only be regarded as absurd, have been made with regard to it.

The first syllable indicates some fortified settlement of earlier date than the present castle, and there is a tradition (without much to support it, however) that a Welsh monastery once existed at the place. Some writers have identified Caerphilly, of course an earlier fortress than that which now exists, with a Castle of Sein Henyd, mentioned in the *Brut y Tywysogion* as having been attacked and taken in the time of Llewelyn ap Yorwerth.

This is not the place to discuss that question, but I venture to think that the context of the *Brut* forbids the idea of the place intended being Caerphilly; and so far as I have been able to ascertain, we have no mention in authentic history of Caerphilly until the time of Henry III, when the present castle was built, under circumstances which may be shortly stated as follows. What is usually referred to as the conquest of Glamorgan by Fitz-Hamon had been of a very incomplete character, affecting directly little more than what is commonly known as the Vale. The hill districts, comprising the great lordships of Senghenydd, Miscin (at any rate the greater part) and Glynrhondda, remained in Welsh hands until the time of Richard de Clare and his son Gilbert in the thirteenth century. Practically, their position seems to have been one of almost complete independence, and their turbulence and frequent risings afforded, in the view of the chief lords, good reason for desiring to get the hill lordships into their own hands. At any



HALL OF CAERPHILLY CASTLE



CAERPHILLY CASTLE FROM THE SOUTH.

rate, Richard and Gilbert adopted this policy with success, and probably with some advantage to the peace of the district.

Richard took Miscin (about 1245), while Gilbert obtained possession of Glynrhondda and Senghenydd. As regards Senghenydd, it is recorded in certain annals in the Public Record Office, printed in Mr. Clark's *Cartæ*, vol. iii, p. 558, under the date 1266, that Gilbert de Clare took prisoner Griffith ap Rhys (the last Welsh lord of Senghenydd,) and sent him as a prisoner to Kilkenny. This is said to have happened on the Saturday after Epiphany, and as presumably the reckoning was according to the old style, the event probably took place early in 1267. Very shortly after this Earl Gilbert commenced the building of Caerphilly Castle, and the taking possession of Senghenydd and building the castle led to a long controversy between the earl, the Prince of Wales and Llewelyn ap Griffith, who alleged that Griffith ap Rhys was his vassal and not the earl's. In Mr. Clark's *Cartæ* and Rymer's *Fœdera* there are to be found a number of documents bearing upon this dispute. It is not possible here to deal with them in detail, but generally it may be said that the king continually urged Llewelyn to refrain from levying war against de Clare, and to submit the dispute to the decision of persons named for the purpose. The *Brut y Tywysogion* states that in October, 1270, Llewelyn took the castle, then in course of building, but perhaps it may be doubtful whether this was so. If it was, there must have been two distinct attacks, for it is clear that there was one in October, 1271, which led to an important agreement of November 2nd, 1271, made "in castris juxta Kaerfili" between Llewelyn, then besieging the castle, and the Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield and the Bishop of Worcester, who had been appointed to endeavour to settle the disputes. The prince was to withdraw from the siege, and allow the bishops to take the castle into their hands. The earl's garrison were to withdraw from the castle and not to interfere with it until the matter should be settled. No rebuilding or fortification of the castle was to take place. This bargain was

not adhered to by de Clare's men, for we find from a letter from King Henry III to his brother Richard, not dated, but which must have been written late in 1271 or early in 1272, that the Constable of Cardiff, de Clare's officer, had obtained possession of the castle by a stratagem from those who were holding it on behalf of the bishops, and who probably were by no means unwilling to give it up. The letter expresses fear that Llewelyn may suppose that the king had connived at this transaction.

The king probably had no concern in this particular matter, but I think it is difficult to read the documents of both earlier and later date bearing upon the dispute without coming to the conclusion that the actual policy of the king was to support de Clare in building the castle, and to gain time, and not really to act impartially as between the parties.

There is no reason to doubt that the main structure of the castle was completed by de Clare, though, as we shall see, alterations and additions were made later, and of which the building itself affords evidence. It was at first intended, probably, rather as a strong fortress than as a place of residence, and meant to secure the lordship of Senghenydd, and prevent incursions of the Welsh from the north.

A small town evidently either grew up immediately upon the building of the castle or had previously existed, and may probably have received a charter from de Clare. In the inquisition taken after his death in 1295 we read of eighty burnt burgages which used to yield before the war £2, and in later inquisitions and ministers' accounts there is frequent mention of burgesses, and there are other entries pointing to the existence of a borough. No charter is, however, known to exist, and there is therefore no evidence as to the mode of government, or the privileges or rights the burgesses may have enjoyed. The war alluded to in the inquisition on the death of Gilbert de Clare, and in which the burgages of Caerphilly were burnt, was a formidable Welsh rising which took place during the last year of his life, while he was in bad health, and the suppression of which required the presence

of Edward I in person. De Clare's son, also named Gilbert, was slain at Bannockburn, 1314, and the lordship was in the hands of the Crown and under the control of various custodians for about three years, until in 1317 a partition was effected of the de Clare estates between de Clare's three sisters and their husbands, Glamorgan falling to the share of Eleanor, the eldest, and her husband, Hugh le Despenser.

In the interval, early in 1316, had taken place the rising of Llewelyn Bren, due apparently to oppression on the part of the custodians of the lordship. In the course of this insurrection Caerphilly was attacked, but not taken, though some damage was done, principally, it would seem, to the outer drawbridge. The total cost of the necessary repairs was £8 7s. 4d. To the time of Hugh le Despenser is attributed by Mr. Clark the construction of the large hall fronting upon the main court of the castle; and his work probably completed the castle, for it is unlikely that anything further was added after his time.

When the troubles of the latter part of the reign of Edward II arose, and he had to fly before the queen and Roger Mortimer, he came to Glamorgan, and for a short time took refuge at Caerphilly, from which place in October, 1326, he issued writs or letters calling upon various persons to raise forces to come to his assistance, but apparently without result. Some writers seem to suppose that Caerphilly was attacked while the king was in it, and that he had to escape secretly, but I am not aware that there is any satisfactory evidence of this. From Caerphilly he made his way to Neath, and he and Hugh le Despenser were shortly afterwards captured near Llantrisant, perhaps while endeavouring to return to Caerphilly, and Despenser was taken to Hereford and executed. Caerphilly Castle was then besieged by the adherents of the queen and Mortimer. The garrison, consisting almost entirely of Englishmen, was under the command of John de Felton, and the place was held out until February or March in the following year. William la Zouch, of Ashby,

who was at that time a supporter of the queen and Mortimer, had charge of the siege. The castle was not taken, but was surrendered by Felton upon the terms of a pardon for himself and the rest of the garrison. It is dated 20th March, 1327, and contains about two hundred names, all but three or four being English, and names, so far as can be judged, of persons not connected with the county, so that probably those who formed the garrison were drawn from some of le Despenser's English manors.

On February 24th, 1327, William la Zouch was appointed custodian of Glamorgan; but on June 12th in the same year Roger Mortimer was appointed, practically, we may suppose, by himself. Eleanor, the de Clare heiress, and widow of Hugh le Despenser, is said to have been imprisoned for a time; but later she was at Hanley Castle, one of the de Clare castles in Worcestershire, from which place la Zouch took her in 1328, and married her without license from the king. We find la Zouch and Eleanor acting as Lord and Lady of Glamorgan as early as February, 1329, and in March of that year la Zouch was again besieging Caerphilly, this time in opposition to the ruling powers, and presumably in order to assert by force his claim to his wife's inheritance. On March 8th there was a mandate to Roger Mortimer to raise the siege, and provide for the safety of Caerphilly Castle. Of the actual events of the siege we know nothing, but it would seem that la Zouch must have come to terms with the young king and his advisers, for on July 7th there was a commission to receive into the king's peace all who had taken part in the disturbances in Senghenydd since William la Zouch took the Lady Despenser out of Hanley Castle. Ultimately on payment of a fine (most of which, however, was remitted) la Zouch, in right of his wife, was recognised as Lord of Glamorgan.

For some eighty years we have no further record of Caerphilly, other than the mention of it in inquisitions on death of lords.

La Zouch died March, 1336, and Eleanor in June, 1337.

She was succeeded by Hugh, her eldest son by Hugh le Despenser, and he, on his death in 1349, by his nephew Edward, who died 1375. Both these lords were much engaged in the French wars of Edward III, and gained credit there; but their rule appears to have been an oppressive one in Glamorgan, and marked, if we may judge by the scanty records which exist, by heavier exactions from the Welshmen of the hills than had been the case under the de Clares. Courts were held monthly at Caerphilly Castle, and at these heavy amounts were levied for heriots, fines, etc. It may probably have been at this period that a saying took its origin, which is hardly yet extinct in the district, which describes a thing as "gone to Caerphilly," when it is irrecoverably lost and will be seen no more. Edward le Despenser was succeeded by his son Thomas, who was beheaded in Bristol in 1400, leaving an infant son Richard. While he was a ward of Henry IV, and the lordship therefore held on behalf of the king, Owen Glyndwr took Caerphilly in 1404, whether after resistance or not I am not aware. It was his practice to destroy castles which he captured, and it is a question of interest whether, as I have thought may possibly have been the case, the great injury and destruction in the way of undermining and blowing up of certain of the towers may have been done in his time. Certain it is that we have no record afterwards which points to the castle with any certainty as being available as a fortress. Leland, in the time of Henry VIII, refers to it as "set among marshes where be ruinous walls of a wonderful thickness, and tower kept up for prisoners as to the chief hold of Senghenydd."

I have mentioned this out of chronological order because it may be thought to throw light on the meaning of the document next referred to. This is a minister's account of Caerphilly for 1428-9, in Lord Bute's possession, which gives in great detail particulars of outlays upon certain parts of the castle, for the most part near the main gateway; and as there are items for fetters for prisoners, it may be

that at that time part was adapted to use as a prison, while possibly the rest was left in a state of ruin or disrepair. It was, however, also thought important to keep in some repair "Felton's Tower," which seems to have been that near the outlet of the water of the moat, and this perhaps does not look as if the castle, other than the prison, was to be abandoned.

What the actual state of affairs was, in the absence of other accounts of this period, must remain uncertain. The name "Felton's Tower" no doubt comes from that of the defender of the castle in the time of Edward II, and perhaps indicates that he built or strengthened it, though it may mean no more than that he lived in it, for the purpose of attending to its defence, obviously an important matter, if it was the tower which guarded the outlet of the moat.

At a much later date Rice Merrick, writing about 1578, says of Caerphilly: "Within it standeth the Castle of Caerfly, being a very high and chargeable building, for it was compassed with a fair and strong ward Wall (entrenched about) with sundry Towers. The Gate standing &c (Learne the description of it) environed with a meare of Water of the South and Marish ground of the West and North &c."

This description leaves it doubtful whether the moat was maintained in Merrick's time, because it does not seem clear whether in speaking of the "meare of water" he was referring to what existed at the time he wrote or to what had existed.

It would seem, however, that to some extent at least the moat must have been maintained, for the Castle Mill certainly existed later, and the water power would be needed to work it.

That the castle generally was in ruins and completely abandoned in Merrick's time is clearly proved by the fact that by a lease still extant, dated July 31st, 1583, Henry, Earl of Pembroke, the then owner, leased it to Thomas Lewis, of the Van, for the lives of Lewis himself and his sons Edward and George, with permission to take stone from the castle for buildings at the Van.

This use of the castle as a stone quarry continued until at least the eighteenth century.

One point of interest has yet to be mentioned. At the north-west corner of the castle fortifications is a mound of earth, standing in the grounds of Miss Anthony's house, and now covered with trees, which Mr. Clark terms "the redoubt," and which he considers was intended for cannon, and thinks was constructed during the Civil War for the purpose of defending the castle. He also attributes to this period the blowing up of the towers of the castle.

On such a point I hesitate to differ from so high an authority as Mr. Clark, but at the time he wrote he was not aware of all the evidence which exists that the castle was entirely in ruins at that time.

I do not say that it was incapable of being occupied and defended, but I do not know of any other instance of an uninhabited and ruinous castle being in fact occupied by either party at that time; and if it is the case that this earthwork was then constructed, and the castle afterwards blown up and ruined, it is strange that there is not a word of mention of these events in the records of the time, and that no tradition of such facts survives in Caerphilly itself.

The point is an interesting one, and though, after what Mr. Clark has written, I cannot feel confident that I am right, I do not myself think it at all probable that the castle was occupied by either side during the Civil War.

As regards the ownership of the lordship of Senghennydd and the Castle of Caerphilly after the time of the Despencers, the lordship and castle shared the fortunes of Cardiff, as described in the notes accompanying the programme of this meeting.

As to the materials of which the castle is constructed, it is mainly built of the Pennant stone of the district, but some of the stones have been brought from a distance. There will be observed in some places, particularly in some of the winding staircases, lias limestone, probably brought from Leckwith or

the neighbourhood, and a red sandstone similar to that found on the shore at Sully. There was also largely used here, as in many other old buildings in the district, what is known as the Sutton stone, from a quarry in the lordship of Ogmore, now parcel of the estates of the Duchy of Lancaster, but in de Clare's time held as four knights' fees under the Lord of Glamorgan.
