# The Archaeology and History Society

(Ammanford and District)

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## Ammanford Motte and Bailey Castle

The first meeting of Ammanford's Archaeology and History Society on 15th May 2006 was an outstanding success, beyond the wildest dreams of the organisers. It had been decided that the inaugural meeting should be a field-visit to Ammanford's little-known motte and bailey castle in Tirydail Lane. About eighty people were counted clambering over the defensive ditches, bailey, and onto the twenty-foot high mound that makes up the motte. This clearly illustrates the level of interest in our local heritage.

The motte, or mound, of Ammanford castle. This view from the railway line behind the site shows clearly the man-made nature of the motte and how heavily wooded it has become with time.

An attentive audience, including several children, heard Richard Jones from Cambria Archaeology and co-founder of this Society give a brief history of motte and bailey castles, followed by what is known of the history and archaeology of Ammanford castle. We summarise the main points below and add some more for members' information.

### Early castle building

The medieval timber castle technology of western Europe was introduced into Britain by the Normans in the 11th-century. The earliest castle recorded in France was built by Fulk Nerra (972–1040 AD), count of Anjou (987–1040) in the Loire Valley. The count also built a number of stone fortresses on his borders, such as at Anjou. He was also one of the early members of the Angevin dynasty.

Pre-conquest castles in England were located at Hereford, Ewyas Harrow, Richards Castle and Clavering. The motte and bailey castles appeared in the British Isles only after the Norman Conquest, and they were a common feature in England by the death of William the Conqueror in 1087.

The first motte and bailey in Wales was built by the Normans at Chepstow in 1067, just one year after their army had made a rude and sudden appearance at Pevensey beach in 1066. The easily accessible coastal areas of South Wales were quickly subdued and colonised by these French-speaking invaders by the 1090s. The Norman lordship of Gŵyr (Gower) was created in 1106. After 1155 a major Welsh military resurgence saw some native Welsh princes recover lands lost to the Normans. Most notable of these was Rhys ap Gruffudd (1132-1197), known as the Lord Rhys, who recovered large areas in west Wales to become the undisputed ruler of the ancient south Wales kingdom of Deheurbarth, the last native Welsh prince to do so. (Deheubarth approximates to the modern shire counties of Carmarthen, Pembroke and Cardigan.)

When William landed at Pevensey beach in 1066, he immediately set about building a castle to protect himself and his most important personnel. This castle was actually built inside the defences of the enormous late 3rd and 4th century Roman 'Saxon shore fort' at Pevensey. Pevensey (Roman *Anderitum*) was listed in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, an administrative document for AD 395-430, as one of the Saxon shore forts and naval bases used by the Roman military on the southeast coast of Britain, to ward off increasing Germanic invasions in the 4th-5th centuries. Constructed in about AD 340, and covering ten acres on a peninsula near the mouth of the River Ashburn, the Roman castle at Pevensey was the only one of the nine Saxon shore forts which was newly built for the purpose. The main entrance at the southwest, approached by land, had two round-fronted bastions guarding a rectangular gatehouse. Pevensey Castle was later rebuilt as a Norman Fortress.

Pevensey Castle: Note the scale of the Norman castle compared to the mid-4th century Roman defences.

This re-use of an earlier fortress enabled William to offer protection for his large army, cavalry and nobles. The castle was brought over by sea in a pre-fabricated form ready for immediate construction. The flat-pack had arrived and earlier than we realise.

William had learned his military skills in northern France where the Normans achieved great fame for their castle building. These served as private fortifications in which people and animals were protected from these feared invaders. The castles also helped protect their owners from attack from their neighbours and from the marauding Vikings.

Some of the Vikings eventually stayed and settled in northern France and the marauding Norsemen became the settled Normans. The area of the lower Seine which they settled took its name from these invaders – Normandy. Although the Normans had assimilated the French language and culture by the time William the Conqueror was born, they were still very much Vikings in everything else. Only three generations separated William the Norman from his ancestor Rolf the Viking who had terrorised northern France in the tenth century and William was every bit as ruthless and violent as his ancestor

The Normans took the concept of French fortifications and adopted it. It is suggested that the Motte and Bailey type castle made its first appearance in England. The motte, on which stood a wooden castle, was a man-made mound, which served as a final fighting place where soldiers could retreat if the castle's outer defences were breached. The castle on top of the motte was reached either by wooden stairs that could be destroyed if the castle itself was attacked, or by a 'flying bridge' that connected the bailey to the castle.

The bailey was a ditch area in front of the motte where people and animals lived in relative safety in times of peace, surrounded by a large wooden fence that kept out attackers and wild animals. These term motte & bailey comes from two Old French words: motte, for 'clod of earth' and bailey, meaning 'enclosure'.

Artist's impression of a motte and bailey in winter

William's castle at Hastings was a pre-fabricated structure of wooden building materials brought on the boats from Normandy as shown on the Bayeaux tapestry (below).


Detail from the Bayeux tapestry showing the motte and bailey castle being built at Hastings. Latin 'CASTELLVM: AT . HASTENG'

The mottes were constructed by building successive layers of stone and earth. The stone layers were needed to strengthen the motte and to assist drainage. The suggestion of layered construction can be seen in the image above.

**Motte and Bailey Castles: Key Points**

- Easy to build (they could be built in about a week).
- Easy to defend (and remember, the Normans were an invading army).
- They could easily be modified later (for example a stone tower could easily be built to replace a wooden tower. Or they could just as easily be abandoned once they had served their purpose).
- Over 500 were built during William's reign as King of England – one every two weeks between 1066 and 1086.
- As well as having obvious military value they were a powerful visible sign of the Normans' power and could be seen for miles around.
- This is why there are so many surviving mottes near the English/Welsh border.
- Around 500 were built in England; 400 timber castle sites are known in Wales, of which some 115 mottes can still be seen in Dyfed alone, with 44 in Carmarthenshire. (Historic Environment Record, Cambria Archaeology)
- There were two popular types of timber and earthworks castles built by the Normans: the motte and bailey and the ringwork castle. The castle at Ammanford was the motte and bailey type, so we needn't go into detail about the ringwork except to say that the two types are often confused, even by experience archaeologists (when a survey was made of Ammanford Castle in 1966 it was initially wrongly classified as a ringwork.)

**Cardiff Castle**

An example of how a wooden motte and bailey could evolve into a substantial stone castle if the location was of long-term strategic importance is Cardiff Castle (the 11th century Norman castle, that is, not the mock-Gothic chocolate-box confection built by the coal magnate Lord Bute in the 19th century). The first Norman castle in Cardiff was built about 1091 by Robert Fitzhamon, Lord of Gloucester, and one of the Conqueror's favoured followers, on a site where at least four Roman castles had stood before. This was the usual earth and timber fortification, merely a mound and bailey. The motte, erected over a rocky hillock, was some 40 feet tall, and would have been protected by a timber palisade. During the 12th century, the castle's lord, Robert the Consul (the illegitimate son of King Henry I), realized the defensive value of reinforcing his fortress with stone and ordered the

construction of the shell keep. The 12-sided keep survives in fine condition, the only significant additions being its 15th century gatehouse and the stairway breaching the sloping motte. Again this castle was built within the walls of a Roman fort.

Cardiff Castle, a 12th century stone keep on top of an 11th century earth motte.

Meanwhile, in our little corner of Wales, Rhys ap Tewdwr succeeded in maintaining his rule in Deheubarth even as the Normans, ominously, were moving further into Wales. This he managed to do only by paying a large financial tribute to William the Conqueror when he marched through south Wales in 1081 on a pilgrimage to St. Davids (three pilgrimages to St. David's was seen as equal to one to Jerusalem). In reality William's pilgrimage wasn't so much an act of piety as a show of Norman strength to the Welsh princes in order to establish his overlordship in the area. It was the common practice at that time for a powerful neighbour to first exact tribute, then invade and take over the lands entirely.

After Rhys's death in 1093, the Normans made a renewed effort to take control of the accessible regions of southwest Wales, and in order to seize remaining native welsh lands they built a network of castles.

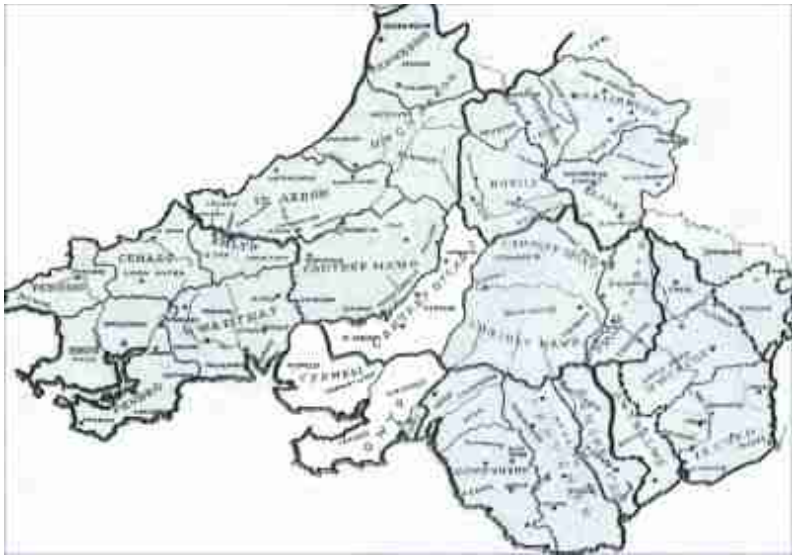
Early in the 12th century the Normans started to push into the Welsh heartlands away from the coastal strip and the Welsh princes responded by building the first native Welsh castles in what was known as 'pura Wallia' ('pure', or non-Norman, Wales), which managed to retain its separate identity for more than two hundred years until the reign of Edward the First.

**Why was Ammanford castle built?**

Whether the castle was built by the native Welsh prince, Lord Rhys, or the invading Normans, is still a matter of dispute among historians to this day. In the 800 years since the castle was a functioning military fortress in the twelfth century, it has become completely overgrown and wooded over, making examination of what little evidence remains very difficult for archaeologists, and no written records survive from the time to assist historians either. During the Norman occupation of Cantref Bychan (c. 1115-58 and again from 1159-62) the only castle of note was at Llandovery.

It is suggested that Ammanford was a Welsh castle built at an important point on the very southern edge of Cantref Bychan, overlooking the Norman lordships of Gŵyr (Gower) and Cydweli (Kidwelly). Cantref Bychan was roughly the area covered by the recent Dinefwr Borough Council and stretched from the river Amman in the south to the river Tywi in he north.

Gower at this time was Norman held and included the land on the Betws side of the Amman. Its boundary followed the Loughor then the Amman rivers. The boundary of the Norman-held Cydweli (Kidwelly) lordship followed the Loughor to its confluence with the Fferws Brook, (at Pantyffynnon) then along the line of the Fferws towards Tycroes and Capel Hendre). It can quickly be appreciated, even by looking at a modern map, that today's Ammanford is close to the point where these three lordships met.



The white areas are the Norman lordships of Gwyr (Gower) and Cydweli (Kidwelly), and the Welsh lordship of Cantref Bychan. Ammanford castle was at the point where these three lordships meet.

The motte at Ammanford was protected from the south by its position on a hill, and the brook that runs below. The area below is shown on an early pre-railway map (1770-1840s) and is called pwll (pool/pond) suggesting it was very wet land or a large pond. To the west the site is located about 4m above the river Loughor and the brook that runs directly below the castle defences.

The only undefended direction is the flat area to the north and east and this is where the defences face. Attackers could easily be seen coming from the direction of Betws to the south or Kidwelly to the west, which were both held by the Normans in Lord Rhys's time. This choice as a strategic position leads some to conclude that the castle was Welsh in construction, as the Normans would hardly need a castle to defend their position from themselves.

Someone who is an advocate of this view is Ammanford medieval historian Roger Turvey, who has written:

> If we accept that Ammanford was built to mark and defend the southern approach to Cantref Bychan, its most likely builder was a native lord who would wish to deter incursions from Gwyr (Gower) and Cydweli (Kidwelly) which remained almost exclusively under Norman control in the twelfth century. A Norman lord of Bychan would regard the Welsh of Cantref Mawr [to the north] a

greater threat and would have sited a fortress on the northern boundary along the river Tywi to complement Llandovery.

No concrete evidence, written or archaeological, exists to back up this theory so it will have to remain conjectural until something does turn up, an unlikely development after so many centuries of farming and neglect on this site.

**Features of this castle**

**Dimensions**: a survey made in 1966 gives us the measurements of the castle:

**Diameter:** impossible to measure, but I paced an approximate semicircle of approx 120 feet, which suggests a diameter of about 75 feet.
**Height:** Scarp (East) 10 feet, no ditch. Scarp (North) 14 feet, c/s (rear of bailey) 8 feet.
**Inner Cup (at top of motte):** 8 – 10 feet deep at a guess.
**Scarp on West:** Still 14 feet to step, about 8 feet of natural slope below.
**Bailey Ditch:** About 8 feet deep. (From a survey by David J. Cathcart King, 1966.)

**Motte**

The inner cup, a hollow at the top of the mound, is an original feature of the castle and could have been used as a cellar for the keep, both to store food in normal times and also as a reserve in the case of an attack and a prolonged siege. But more likely, the actual depression could also indicate the possible presence of a palisade encircling the top of the motte. Wooden flooring would have covered this cellar when the castle was in use, At the top of the mound would have stood the keep, or castle, which would have been as much as four storeys high and surrounded by a palisade fence for protection. The keep would be where all the inhabitants of the motte and bailey could withdraw as a last resort if the defences at the bailey failed.

**Bailey**

It is suggested that the bailey within the castle is not large enough to have contained buildings. However, if we consider the inner ditch to be a later construction, perhaps as the result of a resurgence of Welsh resistance, a bailey becomes more feasible to the north. Around the bailey would be another palisade fence 3.6m (12 ft) in height acting as the first line of defence. Attackers would have to climb down into the ditch then up the other side where they would be easy targets for the defenders on the palisade above. Raining down on would-be attackers would be all the weaponry at hand – arrows, spears and stones. Between the bailey ditch and the outer palisade fence there would also be a moat as a further barrier. In fact, everything we associate with later stone castles were in place except that bio-degradable wood was used to build all walls and defences and not the more durable stone, the reason why nothing has survived for modern inspection.

The great age of stone castle building lay in the future, after the final conquest of Wales by Edward the First in 1282. Although stone castles were built before this by both Normans and Welsh, the scale was nothing compared to what was to come. Then, a ring of stone would encircle Wales as Edward consolidated his power over what proved to be England's first ever colony. It wouldn't be its last.

Two features were remarked on during the site visit which caused some puzzlement. At the southern base of the motte, next to the current County Council buildings, are some stone remains which possibly originate from when the current site was a farm: pigsties, stables, or something similar, perhaps. From the top, a stone- and brick-lined channel leads from the cup down the side of the motte to the bottom. This is clearly relatively recent and looks

as if it's been constructed as an overflow drain to channel water away from the buildings below should the cup at the top fill up after heavy rainfall.

**What happened to the castle next?**

The castle was probably abandoned sometime in the 1170s, possibly because the Lord Rhys's dealings with the new King, Henry II, became more peaceful, with diplomacy replacing warfare as the two rulers co-operated to their mutual benefit. As Roger Turvey writes:

> Being confirmed as rightful lord of Cantref Bychan by an agreement in 1171, the Lord Rhys, in all probability, abandoned these once essential border fortresses; henceforth, until 1189 when war was renewed, his frontiers were to be defended by treaty and diplomacy. The majority of such castles in Wales were disposable assets erected to serve a particular purpose and abandoned when that purpose had been realised or resolved. Therefore, Ammanford may only have been in regular use for a little less than a decade, between circa 1162 and 1171, which may account for its obscurity. Certainly, there is little to indicate that the founder of Ammanford had attempted to establish the means for long-term castle support such as one finds at Llandovery with its borough and church or at Carreg Cennen with its Maerdref or vill of bond tenants (called Trecastell). In short, Ammanford's primary role was one of military defence not civilian settlement.

The castle disappears totally from historical view until the 18th century. Ammanford is a new town compared to nearby Llandybie and Betws, ancient parishes whose churches were founded in the sixth century. Until coal was exploited in industrial quantities in the 19th century Ammanford (which was called Cross Inn until its name was changed in 1880) was a tiny hamlet of no economic significance in the southern corner of Llandybie Parish, and therefore mostly ignored by history, so that few early records of this area have come down to us today. In the 1851 census Cross Inn/Ammanford's population was just 286 people occupying 59 dwellings. By the 1911 census the population had grown to 6,074 as people poured into the newly developed coalfield.

In the intervening centuries the land on which the castle stands (and indeed all of Ammanford) passed eventually into the hands of the Lords Dynevor of Llandeilo who rented it out to a succession of tenant farmers. At some point a large farmhouse was built next to the motte and bailey castle which became known as Tirydail House. Tirydail (meaning 'land of the leaves') is the name given to this part of Ammanford. The first substantial records of ownership of land date back only to 1774, when Lord Dynevor commissioned a land surveyor – Mathew Williams – to prepare a map of the farm holding, which at that time was in the region of some 100 acres, bounded on the east by what is now College Street, to the south by Wind Street and Penybanc Road and by the River Loughor to the west. The motte and bailey is shown on this map.

In later years the property appears to have been leased or rented to an Englishman, Thomas Wright Lawford who, by all accounts, in 1841 was regarded as a progressive farmer, introducing new agricultural and horticultural techniques such as the "Cow Vinery" (taking advantage of animal heat to grow hanging fruit). His advanced ideas were chronicled in the "Cottage Gardener" and other publications on model farming. Within a short period of time he rented two other adjoining farms – Dyffryn and Myddynfych – which enlarged his holding considerably. It is possible that he overstretched himself in this enterprise, as records show that he was forced into bankruptcy, having to sell all his chattels at a public auction held on the 28th of August 1855 – furniture, books, dairy utensils, hurdlemaking, thrashing winnowing and corn-crushing machines etc, all coming under the hammer.

This would, presumably, have been his reason for emigrating to Baltimore, USA, in that year where, according to a legend within his family, he introduced the English sparrow to North America. Whoever did take that insignificant little bird across the Atlantic, in the short time since that day the 'English' sparrow has spread throughout the entire Americas in much the same way as the American grey squirrel has spread throughout Britain. Not so insignificant a bird after all. (See '*Almost Like a Whale, the Origin of Species Updated*', by Steve Jones, Doubleday 1999, page 242). May we not be frivolous for a moment and imagine all those little American sparrows chirruping away in the avian equivalent of Welsh, and with an Ammanford accent at that? And perhaps rename it the *Welsh* sparrow in the process? (The story is only a Lawford family legend, as the sparrow had multiple introductions in the 19th century.)

At some time during this period Tirydail House was completely renovated and turned into a small country manor; the grounds were extensively landscaped, trees planted and secluded walks were formed, along with an artificial ornamental lake. It is said that these works were preparatory to occupation of the residence by one of Lord Dynevor's daughters but this never materialised.

On the 1881 Census records, Mr John Brodie (a Scotsman), along with his two sisters, Miss Mary Agnes Brodie and Mrs Mary Player, are shown as the residents of the property. Mr Brodie was described as a farmer, employing seven labourers and four women servants, farming a holding of 335 acres. The farm bailiff – Mr William Hutchins – occupied a tied cottage known as 'the Bothi' ('Bothi' is a Welsh word for cottage) and the gardener, Mr William Jones, resided at 'Brynmawr Cottage', situated in Brynmawr Lane. Brynmawr Cottage has since disappeared but the Bothi, just across the road from the motte, is not only extant but is still occupied and in use as a domestic residence.

After the death of Mr Brodie, Lieutenant-Colonel William Nathaniel Jones, an industrialist, auctioneer and Registrar of Births and Deaths, took up residency for a short period of time, along with his wife and three children, Charles Norman, Florence Margaret and William Harold, terminating the tenancy in 1892 when the family moved to nearby Dyffryn House. These three children were to give their names to 'Norman Road, 'Florence Road' and 'Harold Street' which were built by their father just a little later to house the employees of Tirydail colliery, Tirydail tinplate works and Ammanford gasworks, which he owned.

In 1899, Mr David Richards, a Justice of the Peace and a High Sheriff of the County, who was involved in the tinplate industry, and at one time sole owner of the Dynevor Tinplate Works at Pantyffynnon, leased the house, residing there until his death in 1937. The farmland was retained by the Dynevor Estate with large areas absorbed in housing developments.

During the 1939/45 War, Tirydail House was requisitioned by the army and for a short period of time became the billet of the 206 Coast Battery, 17th Coast Regiment of the Royal Artillery, before they left on the 15th of March 1941 for North Africa. During the fall of Tobruk on the 20th of June 1942 the Regiment was captured by Field Marshall Rommel 's Army, its soldiers ending up as prisoners of war in Italian and German Camps. The 206 Coast Battery was the only service unit to be stationed in Ammanford during the War.

One Dr A. Harper purchased the property in 1946, restoring the house to a private residence and also converting part of the accommodation into a radiographic (X-ray) clinic.

Next, Carmarthenshire County Council acquired Tirydail House for conversion into a children's home, officially opened in May 1953 by the Rt. Hon. James Griffiths M.P. and renamed 'Cartref'. Two Matrons were in charge of the orphanage for the next 25 years of its existence – first Miss Nancy Jones (who retired in 1970), succeeded by Miss Enid West.

The intake of children fell significantly in the 1970s, resulting in the County Council closing the establishment.

In direct contrast to the care of the young, Cartref next took on a new role when, in March 1982, it was re-opened as a Day Centre where the elderly and handicapped could receive daytime supervision, occupational therapy and treatment.

**The Future?**

The hum of arrows in the twelfth century has been replaced by the somewhat louder hum of traffic in the twenty first. Modern motorists, unaware they are driving past such a historic site, will also be unaware there might be even more destruction in store for what little is left of the old place. That future, waiting inscrutably in the wings, could well be Carmarthenshire County Council who closed the social services day centre in 2005, though leaving the motte untouched, if still 'hatefully overgrown'. What plans the council has for the site are yet to be revealed. For the moment, though, its secrets are still there to be unearthed, literally, as whatever has survived 800 years of erosion by the elements and disturbance by humans lies buried underground.

The buildings of the now-empty Cartref Day Centre and its gardens appear to be up for sale. In the near future Ammanford Town council are awaiting the handover of the castle to their safe-keeping. The Town council have worked over the past three-to-four years along with Richard Jones, Cambria Archaeology, Cadw, Carmarthenshire County Council, and the Pembrokeshire and Derwen Health Trust to realise this dream.

The aim will be to take over the motte and bailey site and make it accessible to the public with interpretation panels and an artist's impression of what the castle might have looked like. The county council have suggested they will clear the site before handover. Cambria Archaeology will then undertake a detailed archaeological topographic survey for Ammanford Town council, funded by Cadw. It will be very interesting to seen what this survey discovers as a detailed survey has never taken place at the site.

**Sources:**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