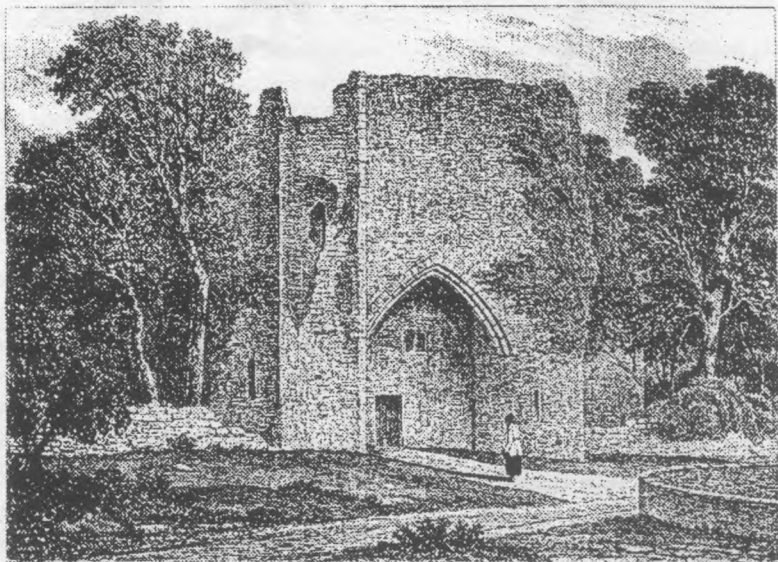




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ST QUENTIN'S CASTLE LLANBLETHIAN



St Quentin's Castle gatehouse in 1828: engraved from the drawing by Jeston Homfray.

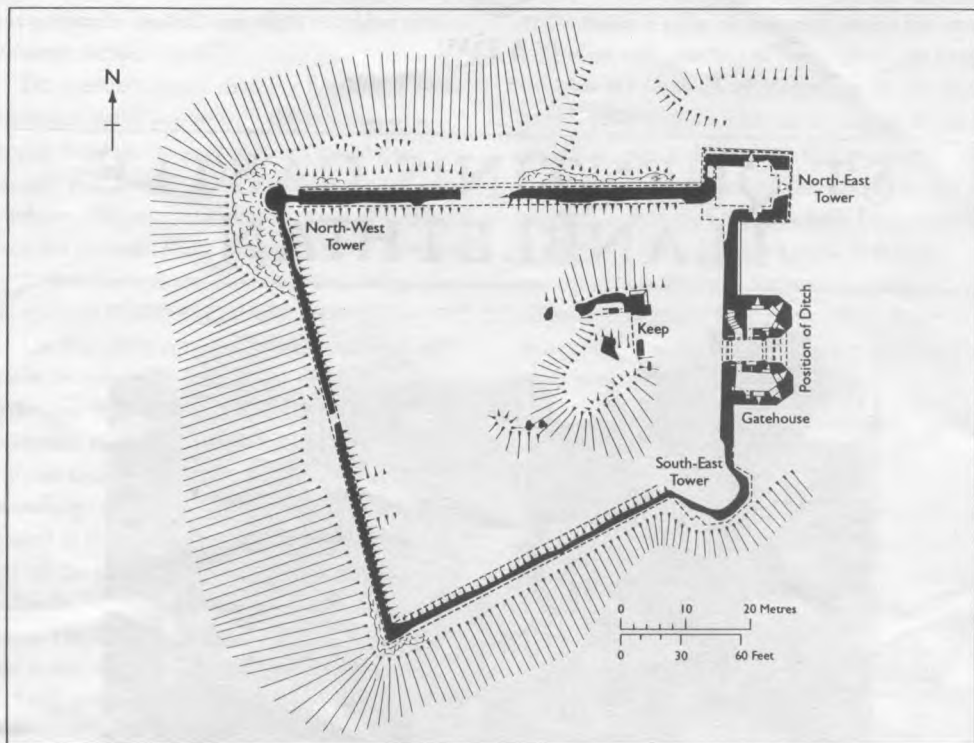
HISTORY

The St Quentins were among the earliest companions of Robert Fitzhamon (d. 1107), the first lord of the formally constituted Norman lordship of Glamorgan. It is not surprising, therefore, that by 1102, when Herbert de St Quentin first features in the records in south Wales, his family had been granted the small member lordship of Llanblethian, together with the larger member lordship of Talyfan to the north. Both lordships were held from Fitzhamon under a privileged

form of tenure free of military service and other feudal obligations. The St Quentin family had also acquired estates in Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Dorset and Wiltshire.

We do not know what form the early twelfth-century castle took but it may have been a timber ringwork with a defensive bank and ditch. Later in the twelfth century, what appears to have been a rectangular stone keep — the remains of which now lie within the mound behind the later gatehouse — was built. This probably replaced a timber predecessor which, by comparison with other castles of the period, would have stood beside the castle entrance.

PLAN OF ST QUENTIN'S CASTLE, LLANBLETHIAN



The lordship and its castle remained in the hands of the St Quentins until 1233, when John de St Quentin was deposed from both Llanblethian and Talyfan by Richard Siward during the rebellion of Earl Richard Marshal against King Henry III (1216–1272). The uprising ended following the death of Richard Marshal in Ireland on 16 April 1234, and Siward, along with many of the other rebels, was reconciled to the king. Although Siward was required to return the castle of Llanblethian to John de St Quentin, instead, he appears to have exchanged it with John for lands in Wiltshire in compensation. In 1244 Siward allied himself with the Welsh lord Hywel ap Maredudd against Richard de Clare, earl of Gloucester and lord of Glamorgan (d. 1262),

and in July 1245 his lands, including Llanblethian, were seized by Earl Richard.

Llanblethian increased in importance once it was absorbed into Earl Richard's main landholdings and with the foundation of the borough of Cowbridge in 1254. There are no records of any building works under the de Clares until the inquisition taken at the time of Gilbert III de Clare's death at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, which makes reference to, 'a certain castle [at Llanblethian] begun by the earl'. This is the castle that we see today. Much of the eastern end, including the gatehouse, was probably complete by the time of the earl's death. However, the survival of no more than the foundations of the south-east tower, the low curtain surrounding the rest of the castle enclosure, and the partial ditch on

the north side suggest that the building works were still incomplete in 1314.

In 1317 Llanblethian came into the hands of Hugh Despenser the younger (d.1326), via his wife, Eleanor de Clare. Four years later, during the barons' uprising against Despenser, Llanblethian was taken and with his other castles was set on fire. Subsequently, the castle appears to have been restored and it was here that Edward, lord Despenser, died in 1375.

In 1440, records show that the castle was in the possession of Isabel, countess of Warwick, at the time of her death in 1439. Llanblethian appears to have continued as a centre of administration and in 1477 there is a reference to a prisoner being held in the castle. The antiquary, John Leland (d.1552), confirmed that the castle was being used as a prison in the 1530s, although there are no later records referring to its use for official purposes.

A drawing made by Jeston Homfray in 1828 shows parts of the gatehouse being used as domestic accommodation, which by the late nineteenth century had degenerated into a cowshed. The ruins were handed into State care by Mr Michael Boland and Mr Royston Dunlop in 1994 and are now managed by Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments on behalf of the National Assembly for Wales.

TOUR

The castle stands at the western end of a low ridge within a loop of the River Thaw with natural slopes on its north, west and south sides. The main defences are at the weakest east end, including the fine twin-towered gatehouse — the last of a fine series to be built by the de Clares.

Over the next year, while consolidation of the outer curtain wall is completed, access will be limited to the eastern end of the castle

and the outside of the other stretches of curtain wall.

This brief tour starts at the entrance to the castle grounds, just outside the north-east tower. To the left, as you face the tower, is the eastern front of the castle. This consisted of an impressive twin-towered gatehouse, flanked by towers at the south-east and north-east angles, and a rock-cut ditch.

North-East Tower

As can be seen from the ground plan, this tower was a very substantial rectangular structure projecting forward from the line of the east curtain wall. Today the entrance to the castle cuts through the centre of what remains of the tower. The now missing upper level was linked by the curtain wall to the second floor of the gatehouse suggesting that these two areas together provided the principal high quality residential accommodation in the castle.

Gatehouse

Standing in front of the gatehouse, you can appreciate the high quality of the masonry. Blocks of local limestone were used for the main facing stone with dressings of Sutton Stone from nearby Southerndown. Recessed joints in the masonry delineate the original stonework from the new, introduced as part of the recent conservation work. The chamfered angles of the two gatehouse towers extended down into the now filled-in ditch, probably to spur bases. Four arrowloops with cross oilllets in each gatehouse tower covered the approach, passage and flanks. Three of the loops in the southern tower have been altered during the prison period. The entrance passage was defended by a murder slot, portcullis and doors, with a second portcullis at the inner end. The passage itself

was originally vaulted with eight moulded ribs of Sutton Stone.

The southern guard chamber has clearly been converted into a prison with the creation of a serving hatch in the arched recess in the gate-passage wall as well as the alterations to its windows. The northern guardroom is also entered from the passage. Stairs through a third door lead to the first floor of the gatehouse and, originally, on upwards to the now missing upper floor.

The first floor appears to have consisted of one wide room — unless it was divided by timber partitions. It lacks the comforts associated with a residential chamber, with only a small fireplace, and one narrow lancet window and four arrowloops for light. A latrine chamber was located in the south-west corner of the room, just off the passage leading to the curtain wallwalk, which extended to the south-east tower. The austere nature of the first floor suggests that it was used as a military guardroom.

Little remains of the upper floor. There is, however, a suggestion that instead of arrowloops there were recesses for windows and that the main residential apartment may have been at this higher, more secure level — linked by a curtain wall to the north-east tower.

Looking at the back of the gatehouse, you can see that the flanking curtain walls are at different heights. That to the left is at second-floor level and is corbelled out at the back to support the unusual arrangement of battlements to the rear as well as to the front of the wallwalk. To the right, the curtain wall leading to the now ruined south-east tower is a floor lower at first-floor level.

Keep

Standing behind the gatehouse is a mound of buried masonry, which is all that remains of the later twelfth-century keep. A photograph taken in

1905 shows a pillar of masonry, which has since collapsed, still standing to the original full height of the tower. A block of masonry from the remains of this pillar is still visible on the top of the mound and its mortar is different to that employed in other parts of the keep. This has led to the suggestion that the keep may have been restored as part of Gilbert de Clare's main building programme in the early fourteenth century, although one might have expected the keep to be taken down had de Clare ever completed his main programme of building works.

South-East Tower

Only parts of the foundations of this irregularly shaped tower are visible and it is possible that — like other stretches of curtain wall — it was never constructed to its full height.

North and West Curtain Walls

Return to the car park, from where you can walk around the outside of the north and west curtain walls, neither of which appears to have been completed to their original intended height. The best surviving stretch, along the north side of the castle, has lost most of its original facing stone except at the very base. Here, there are also signs of an incomplete ditch. A small solid three-quarter-round turret projects beyond the north and west curtain walls, where they meet at the north-west angle of the castle.

The text and illustrations in this leaflet are based on a description of the castle in the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales' forthcoming Inventory on the later castles of Glamorgan. Cadw is grateful to the Royal Commission for agreeing to the use of this information ahead of publication.