



A full colour guide can be purchased from the kiosk on arrival at the Castle for 50p. Much more detail can be found in the book 'Usk Castle, Priory and Town' by Knight and Johnson which is also for sale at the Castle. Usk Castle is privately owned and maintained. All donations from visitors and proceeds from guides, or other purchases from our visitors display area, support the maintenance and upkeep of Usk Castle for future generations.

ABOUT USK CASTLE:

Usk Castle is a Norman Castle that witnessed the battle of Usk in 1405 but became ruined in 1536. Despite this, there are several features which have been preserved to this day.

The Garrison Tower- built in the French style by William, Earl of Pembroke, constructed around 1209

The Great Keep- Originally the Gate House constructed by Richard 'Strongbow' de Clare in 1170.

The Dovecote Tower- a Decorative addition in the private gardens of the castle, built by the Mortimer family in c1380.

The North tower or Treasure Tower- Built by Gilbert de Clare in 1289 to house his revenues

Inner Wall- Built by William Marshall

The Great Hall- Completed by Matilda widow of Gilbert de Clare and still features a Tudor fireplace on the the first floor, it hosted feasts and banquets including a Christmas feast in 1327 which is well documented.

THE INHABITANTS OF USK CASTLE:

Recently, Usk Castle Friends have decorated the ceiling of The Gazebo, one of our licenced locations for marriage, to illustrate the many past inhabitants of the castle over the centuries.

Richard "Strongbow" de Clare (1130-1176). Richard is one of the most important figures in the history of the Castle, the Priory and the Town. He was responsible for the first major stonework of the Castle, the Great Keep Gatehouse, built in about 1174. The Castle had been captured by Hywel ap Iorwerth but after the death of Hywel in 1185 it was again in royal hands. Strongbow established and financed the only Benedictine nunnery in Wales: it became formalised into the Priory Church during the Twelfth Century. As well as strengthening the Castle and establishing the Priory, de Clare founded the Town, complete with a town plan with burgage plots. This enabled a market to operate from which he derived revenue.

William the Marshal (1147-1219). Marshal was the greatest of medieval knights and achieved international fame by fighting tournaments in which he learned combat skills, horsemanship and diplomacy. He was Marshal to five kings (if we include the young King Henry who died prematurely), even to Richard the Lionheart whom he once unhorsed. He remained loyal to King John and played a major part in getting the King to agree to Magna Carta. He made major improvements to Usk Castle transforming it from an earthworks with a stone keep to a strong state-of-the-art defensive castle including the Garrison Tower and a rectangular curtain wall with round towers at the corners. Unlike square towers these were harder to undermine.



Isabella de Clare (1172-1220). Isabella was the daughter of Richard “Strongbow” de Clare and heiress to large estates in Southern England, South Wales and Ireland, including the castles at Chepstow and Usk . She married William Marshal in 1189. They had five sons and five daughters. None of his sons had surviving off-spring and when Marshal died his nephew, Richard de Clare inherited the Lordship of Usk.

Gilbert (the Red) de Clare (1243-1295) Known as “the Red” because of his ginger hair or fiery temperament Gilbert married the illustrious **Joan of Acre (1272-1307)**. He built the Treasury or North Tower in about 1289, presumably for the safekeeping of their valuables. One of the most powerful barons in the land, he joined Simon de Montfort in the Barons’ War against Henry III but changed sides in 1265 and destroyed de Montfort’s fleet in the Severn Estuary. Gilbert was buried at Tewkesbury Abbey. Their first born son, also Gilbert, inherited the Castle but died at Bannockburn in 1314.

Elizabeth de Burgh (1295-1360). After her brother Gilbert’s death at Bannockburn the Castle passed to Elizabeth de Burgh whose second husband Roger Damory was a favourite of Edward II. They undertook major building work, mainly to render the Castle more comfortable for habitation. Damory was fatally wounded in an unsuccessful revolt in 1321 and Elizabeth was deprived of the Castle in favour of Hugh Despenser the Younger (her brother-in-law) and given the less valuable Lordship of Gower instead and imprisoned with her children at Barking Abbey. Elizabeth regained her Castle in 1326 and celebrated with a great Christmas Feast. She lived until 1360, known as Lady Clare and founded Clare College, Cambridge.

Edmund Mortimer, 3rd Earl of March (1351-1381). Edmund’s marriage to Phillipa, Countess of Ulster, and great granddaughter of Elizabeth de Burgh, brought him great wealth. It also brought him dangerously close to the Court where he was looked upon with suspicion by John of Gaunt’s party. He was made Marshall of England in 1369 and retired to Ulster when he fell out of favour. Subsequent Earls also held the Lordship of Usk which eventually passed to Elizabeth of York

Owain Glyndŵr (1359-c.1415). Glyndŵr laid waste to Usk in 1402, burning it to the ground. His forces, led by his brother, returned to the Castle in 1405 believing it not to be garrisoned. Unfortunately for them it was, by the Lords Grey and Greyndour and an English army. The Welsh were heavily defeated with the loss of three hundred men in the Battle of Pwll Melyn just to the north of the Castle. Glyndŵr never fully recovered and his whereabouts in the last decade or so of his life are obscure . Greyndour became Steward of the Castle.

Adam of Usk. (c1352-1430) Adam was born in the Castle Gatehouse and was a famous, though somewhat unreliable, chronicler. Edmund Mortimer , the 3rd Earl, was an early patron and financed his studies at Oxford . Adam accumulated a number of “livings” and had high ambitions for a career in the church. He describes how he persuaded the Pope to grant indulgences to pilgrims visiting the chapel of the Priory devoted to St Radagund. The income from pilgrims rescued the Priory from the poverty it had sunk into due to the recent troubles. Though he was not present at the battle of Pwll Melyn and was actually hostile to Glyndŵr, he wrote a dramatic account of the battle.



MEDIEVAL TIMES TO PRESENT DAY:

Following many years in ruin, the Usk Castle gatehouse was adapted to a house in 1680 and has been a fern garden and a dame school over the years.

The Castle House was rented to the Humphreys family from 1908 and purchased in 1921. The Castle ruins remained in the ownership of D E Thorn until 1933- when they were purchased for £525, part of the bill comprising of a flag and a donkey, to of preserve the heritage of the castle and save it from the threat of unsuitable development.

The maintenance of the ruins, the gardens and surrounding woodland became Rudge and Anne Humphreys life's work. They created the gardens you see today, which are open to the public on the last weekend of June each year under the Open Gardens scheme. Rudge's diary, (a fascinating printed version is available for a small fee on arrival from our visitors kiosk) carefully documents the planting of many shrubs, trees and the careful repair, preservation and maintenance of the ruins, and the development of the features of the garden you can see and enjoy today, indeed many parts of the castle were excavated by working teams of family and friends in the 1930s.

For this reason, the recently decorated ceiling of the Gazebo depicts a painted re-creation of much loved a family photo, picturing Rudge and Anne, at their happiest- hard at work in the herbaceous border of the beautiful garden they created.

Today Rosie and Henry Humphreys maintain and manage the garden and ruins, and the Castle House is their family home.