

# EWYAS HAROLD FROM THE DOMEDAY BOOK TO THE PRESENT DAY

## some notes by Warren Skidmore

I have taken groups several times to see the mound where the castle once stood, although there is little there today except a dense thicket that discourages a proper walkabout. The tiny sign directing the occasional curious visitor to the site promises nothing, and delivers less. We have always been the only visitors. However, on the positive side, here, at what amounts to Mecca for the Scudamore/Skydmore family, there is not a single souvenir shop!

Although the castle was built before the Norman Conquest its recorded history begins with the Domesday Book where we find:

*“Alfred of Marlborough holds the castle of EWYAS (HAROLD) EWIAS from King William. The King himself granted him the lands which Earl William, who had refortified the castle, had given him; that is, 5 carucates of land in that Place and 5 other carucates at Monnington. The King also granted him the land of Ralph of Bernay which belonged to the castle. He has 2 ploughs in lordship; 9 Welshmen with 6 ploughs who pay 7 sesters of honey; 12 small holders who work 1 day a week. 4 ploughmen; 1 man who pays 6d. Five men-at-arms of his, Richard, Gilbert, William, William, and Arnold, have 5 ploughs in lordship; 12 smallholders and 3 fisheries; meadow, 22 acres. Two others, William and Ralph, hold land for 2 ploughs. Thurstan holds land which pays 19d; Warner land at 5s. They have 5 smallholders. Value of this castle of Ewyas (Harold) £10.*

*In the castlery of EWYAS (HAROLD) Earl William gave 4 carucates of waste land to Walter de Lacy. Roger de Lacy his son holds them, and William and Osbern from him... 4 Welshmen who pay 2 sesters of honey ... Value of this land 20s.*

*In the castlery of EWYAS (HAROLD) Roger holds from Henry [de Ferrers] 3 churches, a priest and 32 acres of land; they pay 2 sesters of honey. In the castle he has 2 dwellings.”*

Ewyas Harold is not a graceful village; somehow an awkward name seems to have spawned an awkward place. A modern Catholic church surfaces like the conning tower of a submarine from the valley floor, and the castle mound is without a stone, too hidden in the dense undergrowth to give the village a focus. The modern cul-de-sac housing is no more than an extended residential lay-

by, off the Hereford-Abergavenny trunk road.<sup>1</sup>

Situated at the junction of the Monnow and the Dore Rivers, Ewyas Harold was designed to command the routes through the Black Mountains. Welshmen rendering sesters of honey sounds benign enough, but the area was by no means stable in the eleventh century, and the atmosphere must have been perpetually tense. The Norman military network stretched at its westerly end as far as Roger de Lacy's castle at Ewyas Lacy (Longtown) higher up the valley of the Monnow within the Welsh "commote" called Ewyas. Osbern Pentecost had built Ewyas Harold castle before 1066, when the Normans were beginning to settle in Herefordshire. He was banished by Edward the Confessor and is said to have died with Macbeth at Dunsinane. The Domesday landholder, Alfred of Marlborough, was his nephew. The carucates, or ploughlands, at Monnington, in more settled country down the Wye, were the sort of economic back-up which a border holding needed; the men-at-arms (*milites*) were there for obvious reasons.

The castle at Ewyas Harold remained of some strategic value until the death of the Welsh rebel Owen Glendower in 1416. In the antiquarian John Leland's day (1550) some stones were still standing at the site, but a later antiquary, Richard Symonds, who visited it with Charles I after the battle of Naseby in 1645, found it "all ruined and gone." Like the great Cistercian abbey nearby at Dore, it had been picked to pieces by stone scavengers among the local farmers.

Compared with its medieval excitements, the village's later history is dull. Self sufficiency broke down during the depression of the nineteenth century and the links of today's families with Canadian relatives are reminders of depopulation by emigration. The building of the Golden Valley railway line gave the village a brief revival, but cars have pulled the focus back in the direction of Pontrilas in Kentchurch parish. Today, only the common (120 acres of upland scrub) give Ewyas Harold any distinctiveness. The long hold of a military society seems to have discouraged the development of a great house: The Marquess of Abergavenny, an absentee landlord, sold up his Herefordshire estates in 1920. With no manor to serve and with no common on which to graze and to burn lime, the villagers have remained an independent lot.

It may be taken as certain that the castle was originally built of oak timbers. The chapel within the castle was probably built of stone somewhat later, and then the timbers replaced with stone from the quarry. The site of the castle at Ewyas Harold was examined by G. T. Clark, who published the results of this investigation in his *Medieval Military Architecture*, and at somewhat greater length in the *Archaeologia Cambrensis*. Reverend Arthur Thomas Bannister, born in 1861, the vicar of Ewyas Harold, wrote an exemplary history of the castle, priory, and church published in 1902.<sup>2</sup> His notes on the site of the castle have not been improved on, and are copied here almost verbatim from his observations done at the scene. Bannister ventured to give us a drawing of the site, as well as some additional particulars and measurements. Hopefully the day may come when his projections will be improved by an excavation by trained archaeologists who can chart post holes and tell us still more about the probable sequence of the improvements made to the original structure.

Beginning with the platform of the lower ward, the most noticeable feature is its unevenness

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Hinde, *The Domesday Book, England's Heritage, Then and Now*, (CLB 1977) 127.

<sup>2</sup>*The History of Ewias Harold* (Hereford, Jakeman & Carver, 1902) 100-1. I think that I have the only copy in the United States (it is not in the Library of Congress), a gift of John Lucas-Scudamore of Kentchurch Court who told me that Bannister was one of his tutors at Oxford.

and irregularity of surface, due, as it would seem, to the foundations of the various buildings it contained having been dug up, to be used for building purposes. This must have been done in the close of the 16th and the early part of the 17th centuries, since Leland saw considerable buildings standing, including the Chapel of St. Nicholas. But Symonds, writing a century later, found not even the foundations though he was told that the walls had been more than three yards thick in places.

The irregularities are most observable in the northeast angle of the platform (near the point marked E in the Plan), where very large holes have evidently been dug. One of these holes - a little to the southeast of the gap (and marked E in the plan) is sixty feet long and twenty-two feet broad, and of an average depth of about seven feet. According to Bannister fragments of stone, of no great size, with mortar here and there visible upon them, could still be dug out in these holes a hundred years ago. We may perhaps venture to conclude, from all this, that the chief buildings of the *basse cour* were on this northeast side. Round the edge of the platform there is no well-defined trench marking the line where the foundations of the walls have been grubbed up, such as we shall see on the top of the mound: but - most clearly marked on the east side - a sort of raised dyke runs round the outer edge of the platform. On the southeast side the ground falls away very steeply from the platform, and though at the bottom of the slope, there is a slight depression (complicated later by a hedge-row on its outer rim) where a ditch may have been.

This ditch could never have been of any great width or depth. On the northeast and southwest sides no trace of a ditch is to be found. On the north side, between the mound and the high ground from which it has been artificially cut off, the ditch is between sixty and seventy feet wide, and about thirty feet deep, with steep sides, which it is all but impossible to climb.

The ground falls steeply at each end of this deep trench; and there is no trace of a dam at the lower (northeast) end. There is still a water-course near to, and coming down from above the southwest end; this stream, tiny in summer, but often swollen into a river in winter, now runs round the south side of the castle hill, joining the Dulas brook in the village itself. In the absence of any trace of a dam -- and a huge one would have been needed at the northeast end -- it is doubtful that this enormous ditch was ever filled with water. The only practicable approach to the castle is at the point (marked D in the plan) which Clark supposes to have been the main entrance. The descent at the spot marked E, where possibly there was a postern gate, is very steep; but, at some time in the last century, it was rendered passable for rough carts, which crossed the platform to the quarry (marked F on the plan) now disused.

Let us now turn to the mound itself which in places is thickly overgrown with bushes and brambles. It rises some seventy or eighty feet above the level of the platform, with sides so steep that Clark's conjecture that the keep must have been reached by a flight of steps is rendered almost certain. When we reach the top we find for some sixty-six feet on the southeast edge (*i.e.*, the side looking to the village) a well marked trench between two and three feet deep and about twelve feet wide. This trench, less strongly marked, however, can be traced at intervals all round the top of the mound, giving us evidently the line of wall, and being itself the result of the digging up of the stone foundations.

On the northwest side, running out from the presumed line of wall, are five projecting ridges, each some four to six feet broad at the top, with hollows between. The most northerly of these projections extends twenty-one feet from the outer rim of the trench (which here is about fourteen feet wide). The next, and following projections, are about the same length, but cannot be exactly measured owing to the thorns and brambles. The internal measurements of the keep (*i.e.*, from inner

rim to inner rim of the trench) are, from east to west seventy-two feet, and from north to south seventy feet.

For the “Scudemer” presence at the castle see my history of Upton Scudamore (2nd edition, 1989). Harold of Ewyas can be found in the old *Dictionary of National Biography*, but this account will undoubtedly be improved in the new edition of the DNB in progress. See also the useful note on Ewyas Harold in the fine article on *The Fief of Alfred of Marlborough in Herefordshire in 1086 and its Descent in the Norman Period* by Bruce Copleston-Crow found in the Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists’ Field Club, volume XLV (1986) 376-414.