White Castle in the Thirteenth Century: A Reconsideration

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In a note in the Antiquaries Journal, xv (1935), 330-3, the late Bryan O’Neil recorded an important group of pottery vessels found during clearance work at White Castle, Monmouthshire, in the early 1930s, and now in the National Museum of Wales, dating them to the period of Hubert de Burgh’s tenure of the castle, i.e. before 1239. Two statements were advanced in support of this dating: (i), that after the grant of the castle to the lord Edward in 1254 ‘there was no resident lord’; (ii), that ‘in view of the disuse of the castle as an important residence from the latter part of the thirteenth century onwards, it seems that these vessels must be attributed to the first half of that century’. This summary of the history of occupation of the castle was based on Mr. Ralegh Radford’s Official Guide, in which the extensive structural modifications of the basically twelfth-century inner ward, together with the masonry defences of the outer ward, are all attributed to Hubert de Burgh.

Advances in the study of thirteenth-century pottery have made it desirable to establish the dating evidence for the White Castle material on as reliable a basis as possible, and to this end to re-examine the castle’s early history. The purpose of the present study is (a) to show that there appear to be reasons for qualifying the commonly held view that, following a period of some magnificence in the personal occupation of the justiciar, White Castle relapsed into obscurity and ceased to count after his fall from power; and (b) to cite the evidence of a record, hitherto unnoticed, which suggests that the extensive strengthening of the defences effected by the ‘second’ work at the castle, far from being undertaken by Hubert de Burgh, could not in fact have been put in hand till some time after 1257.

(a)

It is well that it should be recognized straight away that we have no positive evidence of White Castle being in use at any time as ‘an important residence’; nor is there any record that, among the ‘castles of the justiciar’, White Castle in particular was a favourite residence of Hubert’s, or indeed that he ever resided there at all. This is not to say that he did not reside there, only to sound the note of caution that there appears to be no evidence that he did. All we have in support

The same view of the castle’s decline in importance through not being used as a residence is expressed in Archaeol. Cambrexis, 1936, p. 346.
of this now widely disseminated tradition is the statement of Matthew Paris, quoted in the paper already referred to, naming White Castle as one amongst four castles to which Hubert was said to be strongly attached (castra . . . carissima) and upon the reconstruction of which he had spent lavishly; the phrasing, however, does not have to be read as implying that he spent equally lavishly at every one of the four, particularly when it is remembered that separate enumeration of the 'Three Castles' is always liable to contain an element of common form. The pros and cons of his having spent money on White Castle to the same extent as it appears likely he did on Grosmont and Skenfrith are considered more fully under (b) below. Here it will suffice to note that the only precise record of Hubert de Burgh's actual presence at any of the Three Castles is one that shows him not at White Castle but at Skenfrith. That Skenfrith was intended to serve as a nobleman's residence is demonstrated by the quality of the domestic buildings recently excavated there. The stone-built hall and solar wing at Grosmont accord with a similar use for that castle also. On the other hand one has the feeling that White Castle, militarily the strongest of the three, but where the buildings within the inner ward were of timber, was much more the purely 'garrison' castle, the place where stocks of ammunition were kept and to which prisoners were sent for safe custody under the constable. The impression is reinforced by a record that the customary tenants of Llanfihangel Ystern Llewern were liable to be summoned for garrison service at the castle, and to come equipped with bow and arrows and a sword or long knife.

There is ample evidence that the Three Castles, White Castle among them, continued to be places of consequence in the military affairs of the march all through the second half of the thirteenth century. This indeed is implicit in their retention as a quasi-royal lordship, granted successively to the king's eldest son, the lord Edward, in 1254 and to his brother Edmund in 1267. In 1260 new provisions were made by the king, the council and prince Edward for the castles' safe keeping and they were placed in the custody of Gilbert Talbot. Two years later Gilbert was ordered, on account of the disturbed state of the march and the rapid eastward advance of the Welsh, to take all necessary measures to strengthen the castles (castra illa muniri faciat); and while it cannot be certain that 'works' are envisaged, it is worth noting that the very next entry on the Close Roll is concerned with providing the bishop of Hereford with 40 or 50

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1 Antiquaries Journal, xv (1935), 333.
2 For the identification of the fourth castle at Hadleigh, Essex, see Sir Maurice Powicke, King Henry III and the Lord Edward, ii, 766, note 2.
3 8 October, 1229: payment of 18d. to a messenger 'going to the king's justice at Skencfrith' (Cal. Liberate Rolls, 1226-40, p. 146).
5 E.g. 31 August, 1233, contrabreoe to the sheriff of Gloucester to receive 10,000 quarrels from the constable of St. Briavels and cause them to be carried to White Castle (Cal. Liberate Rolls, 1226-40, p. 229); 1256-7, 2 buckets of quarrels sent from St. Briavels to White Castle (P.R.O., Ministers' Accounts, 1094/11, m.5).
6 1256-7, payment of 32s. to John ic Breton for seizing 7 hostages at Builth and taking them to White Castle (ibid.).
7 W. Rees, South Wales and the March, 1284-1415, pp. 64 and 147, note 2.
8 Close Rolls, 1259-61, p. 42.
For the rest of the century, whenever troops were required for the Welsh campaigns, the lordship of the Three Castles was one of the sources of supply, and writs to their bailiffs and constables show that their alleged 'decline in importance' cannot be accepted without qualification.

(b)

Insofar as the dating of the White Castle pottery to the de Burgh epoch was mainly influenced by the hitherto accepted ascription to de Burgh of all the later structural work at the castle, it is desirable to examine that ascription afresh. It is based not so much on architectural detail, closely datable features of which are notably few, but rather on (i) the words of Matthew Paris already referred to and (ii) the superficial resemblance to Hubert’s probable work at Grosmont which the added flanking towers provide at White Castle.

The grafting of these towers on to the already existing inner curtain was associated with the demolition of an earlier square keep standing astride its south-east section, which was thereafter built to run continuously where the keep had formerly stood (PL. xxviii). These modifications to the defences of the inner ward correspond in general character with the walls and towers of the outer ward, and both are probably rightly to be regarded as stages in a more or less unitary operation. If so, it follows that the defences of the outer ward must likewise have been built after, or at most only a very short time before, the demolition of the keep. It so happens that in the sole surviving roll of accounts for manors and castles of the lord Edward which accounted at his exchequer at Bristol, namely that for the period Michaelmas 1256 to Michaelmas 1257, we have the record of a payment which, small though it is, plainly implies that the keep was still standing and being kept in repair at that date. The entry is as follows: *In plumbo et stanno ad turrim, iij. s. ij. d.* The reference to the *turre* is unequivocal and the purchase of lead and tin for it is most likely to indicate that repairs were being undertaken to its roof. This must mean, if we reason correctly, that most if not all the later structural work at White Castle, far from being assignable to Hubert de Burgh and the period before 1239, belongs at earliest to a year or two after 1257.

Is this indeed unlikely? The answer will partly depend on what inferences we may reasonably draw as to what is likely to have been the relative adequacy of the accommodation and defences at each of the castles of the trilateral at the time of their grant to Hubert in 1201, and, following from this, how great we might expect the need to have been, in each case, for the *readificationes* spoken of by Matthew Paris. For documentary evidence we have to rely on the Pipe Rolls, which during the last decades of the twelfth century record works expenditure as follows:

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10 Ibid., p. 191.
11 Cal. Chancery Rolls (Varios), pp. 280, 313, 316.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Grosmont</th>
<th>Skenfrith</th>
<th>White Castle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1183-4a</td>
<td>In operatione castelli de Grosmunt £14 6s. 8d.</td>
<td></td>
<td>In operatione castelli de Lantelio, £43 6s. 8d., per breve regis et per visum Radulfi de Grosso Monte.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1184-5b</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In operatione castelli de Lantelio, £85 9s. 4d., per breve regis et per visum Radulfi de Grosmunt et Alani de Perci. Et Radulfo de Grosmunt £2 de dono quia curam egit predicte operationis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1185-6c</td>
<td>In operatione cuindam camere in castello de Grosmunt, £1</td>
<td></td>
<td>In operatione domus in turri de Latolio, £2 6s. 8d., per breve, &amp;c.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1186-7d</td>
<td>In operatione castelli de Kenefrit £43 17s. 7d., per breve regis et per visum Radulfi de Grosso Monte.</td>
<td></td>
<td>In operatione j. grangie in castello de Lantelio, 5s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1187-8e</td>
<td>In emendacione palizii castelli de Kenefrid £1 5s. 6d. Et Radulfo de Grosso Monte custodi operationis de Kenefrid, 2 marks, de dono regis.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1190f</td>
<td>In operatione ballie de Kenefrid, £7 15s. 10d.; in operatione ballii de Kenefrid, £6 8s. 7d.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1193g</td>
<td>In operatione castelli de Kenefrid, £4 15s. 8d.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Totals**

- **Grosmont**: £15 6s. 8d.  
- **Skenfrith**: £65 9s. 4d.  
- **White Castle**: £133 7s. 8d.

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**Notes to Table:**

- a. *Pipe Roll Society*, xxxiii. 25:  
- b. *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 196:  
- c. *Ibid.*, xxxvi. 29:  
- d. *Ibid.*, xxxvii. 130-1:  
- e. *Ibid.*, xxxviii. 210:  
- f. *Ibid.*, xxxix, 45-48:  
- g. *Ibid.*, xli. 86:

If we can accept these figures as providing a broadly true index of the proportion of work carried out at each castle over the twenty years before Hubert de Burgh’s first acquisition of the lordship, they indicate that more than twice the amount of money was spent on works at White Castle as on works at Skenfrith and more than eight times as much as on works at Grosmont. The figures also show that more was spent on White Castle in the two seasons of 1185, 1186, than on the shire castle of Hereford in a twenty-five year period from 1164 to...
Thus while they make it reasonable to suppose that at Grosmont and Skenfrith there might well have been much to demand the new lord's attention, and allow us to accept as Hubert's work the main masonry defences of the former and most if not all of what we now see or know awaits excavation at the latter, they suggest that in White Castle he became possessed of a fortress whose defences had only lately been put in order and on which further large expenditure would not soon be needed. That it was not incurred is suggested by the fact that in 1244, the year after de Burgh's death, the crown found it necessary to provide the castle with a new hall, pantry and buttery. Such replacements at such a time do not easily accord with any large share of the infinita pecunia devoted by the justiciar to the reedificationes of his favourite castles having been bestowed on that of Llantilio. In 1915, when Round wrote his Introduction to the Pipe Roll of 33 Henry II (1186-7), he was puzzled by the reference to a turris at White Castle because there was then no keep to be seen there. But the discovery of its foundations some fifteen years later confirmed the truth of the record, and there can be little doubt that the consecutive expenditure of 1184-6 is to be related to the erection of the inner ward's first stone curtain, and that of 1186-7 to some consequent alteration to the dwelling in the then already existing square tower on to which the curtain was built.

In all the circumstances, therefore, it would not seem surprising for White Castle, unlike Grosmont and Skenfrith, to have seen no further major development until well on in the thirteenth century, and for the turris of, say, c. 1150 still to have been standing athwart a still unflanked curtain in 1256-7, as the record of that year suggests. We accordingly have to ask ourselves at what time after the latter date the strengthening and modernization represented by the 'second' work is most likely to have been undertaken. Possible answers are not far to seek. The order, already quoted, to the keeper of Monmouth and the Three Castles to have them 'munitioned' by every means and at whatever cost was dated by the king at Canterbury on 24 December, 1262. It was issued at a time of dire emergency. During the preceding four weeks castle after castle had fallen to the Welsh on the southern march. Cefnllys, Bleddfa, Knucklas, Knighton, Norton, Presteigne and Brecon had all been lost, and Llywelyn stood on the outskirts of Abergavenny. Weobley and Eardisley were ravaged and Hereford itself was threatened. If Abergavenny fell, there was only White Castle to impede an advance to the lower Wye at Monmouth. In the event the Welsh were turned back at Abergavenny at the end of February, 1263. But the danger remained, and it could well be that this was the year that saw reconstruction put in hand to fit White Castle for what might now be a key role in the defence of the Monmouth borderland.


Pipe Roll Soc., xxxvii, xli.

Above, p. 170.

Sir John Edward Lloyd, History of Wales, ii, 730-1; for other aspects of these critical months see Powicke, King Henry III and the Lord Edward, pp. 430-2.
No accounts for works survive at this or any other time, because apart from the single survivor from 1256-7 the rolls on which they would be recorded are lost: nevertheless it is worth remarking that in 1263 the lord Edward was going to all lengths to raise money, e.g. by loans from march towns such as Shrewsbury, Ludlow and Hereford 'for certain urgent business of the king’s in the marches'. On the other hand it may be that the stresses of that year, and indeed of the years of Lewes and Evesham that followed it, would not have permitted castle works on the scale we are considering. For this reason the alterations are perhaps even more likely to belong to the years after 1267. In 1267 the Treaty of Montgomery recognized Llywelyn’s conquests and left him in possession of Builth and Brecon, Efael and Maelienydd. Apart only from Abergavenny, which was in royal hands because of a minority, White Castle now stood after Montgomery as the westernmost royal castle on the march. It may be no coincidence, therefore, that in this same year 1267 its lordship, together with that of Grosmont, Skenfrith and Monmouth, was transferred from the hands of Edward to those of his brother Edmund, who already in 1262 had been designated capitanus of the military forces19 and who was to hold the same appointment as commander of the southern armies when the struggle with Llywelyn was renewed in 1277. Indeed on grounds of sheer historical probability White Castle’s refortification—and it is military, not domestic work that we are dealing with—is most likely of all, within the limits of date set by the document of 1256-7 on the one hand and by its architecture on the other, to have been undertaken by Edmund of Lancaster as a measure of defence in the path of further Welsh advance and to fit it as a strong base against the time when the tide of march warfare should flow the other way again—that is to say between 1267 and 1276.

Dating the later work at the castle to the third rather than to the first or second quarters of the thirteenth century does not of itself effect a corresponding modification in the dating of the pottery. It does, however, provide conditions in which a later dating becomes possible. Most of the material found in the early 1930s is described as having come from the bottom of the inner moat, the only stated stratification being that the finds occurred above the primary silt.20 As the White Castle earthworks are likely to belong to the earliest phase of Norman occupation, such finds could, archaeologically speaking and on the evidence given, belong to a date plus or minus 1100. But this is plainly not the case, and the question arises whether the ditches may not later have undergone, as castle ditches often did, a mundificatio or cleansing and clearance. It is not improbable that such an operation would have been carried out simultaneously with the construction of the flanking towers to the inner ward, for it would have been directed to the same end, namely impeding the bringing up of siege engines and warding off direct attack on the curtain proper. In this case ‘primary’ silt might not be that which followed the original cutting of the ditch but might post-date

18 P.R.O., Liberale Roll No. 41.
19 Powicke, King Henry III and the Lord Edward, p. 431.
a scouring of 1263 or later. Finds coming from above it would then be more likely to be deposits, in round figures, of c. 1270.

To sum up, an attempt has been made to show:

1. That the impression of the history of White Castle in the thirteenth century as comprising a period of brilliance under the justiciar followed by one of eclipse under his successors is erroneous;

2. That the evidence for associating the second work at the castle with Hubert de Burgh, and therefore dating it before 1239, is inconclusive;

3. That on the contrary there is positive documentary evidence to suggest that the late twelfth-century defences were still substantially unchanged in the late 1250s;

4. That on historical grounds their rehabilitation is likely to date from 1263 or, still more probably, from the period 1267-76;

5. That a simultaneous clearing of the moats is an eventuality likely enough to require to be taken into account in arriving at the date of deposits recovered from them.

NOTE

The method of this paper has been to examine afresh the documentary evidence, scanty as it is, in relation to the historical trends of the period.

Mr. Radford, who kindly consented to read my typescript and subsequently to re-examine the architectural details, writes as follows:

'I am entirely in agreement with your conclusions about the date. The historical evidence by itself would not settle the point, though, as you argue, it better fits a date c. 1260, rather than a generation earlier. I have examined the details of the masonry. The outer gatehouse, now fully cleared, has two doorways with stopped chamfers of a type that cannot be before 1250; I saw no evidence that these were inserted. The other stopped chamfers, though not excluded in c. 1230, better fit a later date. Moreover the elaborate inner gatehouse can hardly be as early as 1230: cf. the simple gate at Skenfrith. Looking at White Castle in the fuller knowledge of medieval castle development now available, I should say third quarter, not second quarter, of the thirteenth century. I am very glad that you have drawn attention to this need for revision.'