

BLECHINGLEY CASTLE AND THE DE CLARES.

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BLECHINGLEY CASTLE was the chief seat in Surrey of the great family of De Clare, so named from their castle and Honour of Clare in Suffolk, but subsequently most famous as Earls of Hertford and of Gloucester, lords of Glamorgan, Morgannoc, Kilkenny, Tunbridge and Clare, most powerful among the Lords Marchers of Wales,¹ and in quite the foremost rank of the Baronage of the thirteenth century. Richard de Tonebridge, who came into England with the Conqueror, was one of the many Norman barons who traced their descent from Richard the Fearless, third duke of the Normans. He received extensive lands in England in many counties, ninety-five manors in Suffolk alone, and thirty-eight in Surrey.² These, contrary to the practice supposed to have been followed by the Conqueror of distributing grants widely, formed a fairly compact

¹ Richard and Gilbert de Clare, grandsons to Richard de Tonebridge, conquered a great part of South Wales. The latter became Earl of Pembroke, and was father to Richard called Strongbow who conquered part of Ireland.

² I keep the word "manors" for convenience, without pledging myself to the opinion that Domesday local names were manors in the later sense exactly. Richard de Tonebridge held Chivington in Blechingley, Blechingley, Chelsham, Tandridge, Tillingdon, another manor unnamed, Farley, Woldingham, Tooting, Streatham, Chipstead, Worth now in Sussex, Buckland, Beddington, Woodmansterne, Walton-on-the-Hill, Mickleham, Talworth, Long Ditton, Ember Court, Malden, Chessington, Walton Leigh, Apps Court, East Moulsey, Stoke d'Abernon, land in Driteham an unknown place in Effingham hundred, Albury, Shalford, Talworth (*bis*), Thorneroft, East Betchworth, Minchin, Effingham, Ockham, Ockley, Eversheds, West Betchworth,

group, reaching from Stoke d'Abernon and Effingham in the middle of the county to Woldingham, Chelsham and Tandridge, near the Kent border, and not far from his Kentish lordships. He had another distinct group of manors, from Walton to Malden, in the Emleybridge and Kingston hundreds. The main group lay on each side of the three great roads which traversed the eastern half of Surrey. These were the Pilgrims' Way, the great line of communication east and west, the Stone Street from Chichester to London, hard by which the De Clares later had a small castle at Ockley, and the road through Godstone, which, with its branches, connected the Sussex coast from Shoreham to Pevensey with the Thames Valley. About two miles in a straight line from where the first and the last of these roads intersected stood the Castle of Blechingley. It was on the southern borders of the De Clares' dominions, with no settled country south of it at the time of the Domesday Survey, nor probably for long after that, except Worth in Sussex, some miles distant, which also belonged to the De Clares, and was as likely as not even then useful as an iron mine and forge.

In 1086 Richard was the greatest landholder in Surrey under the king. He was approached most nearly by the Bishop of Bayeux, whose lands were not capable of becoming an hereditary lordship. Later on, when the De Warennes received Surrey lordships from William Rufus, and when the Earldom of Surrey was conferred upon them and their descendants in the female line who clung to the name of De Warenne, there was a rivalry between the houses of De Warenne and De Clare. With the inevitable exceptions, natural to a turbulent and unstable race of politicians, the De Warennes and De Clares stood on opposite sides in civil dissensions and war. The former, inter-marrying with the royal family, were usually supporters of the kings; the latter were constantly upon the baronial side. Gilbert de Clare, the first who became Earl of Gloucester, was one of the twenty-five barons appointed to enforce the observance of the Great Charter. He adhered to the French Prince

Louis against John and Henry III, and was taken prisoner when fighting on his side at Lincoln. He died in 1230, not more than about fifty years of age. His son Richard—the De Clares kept up the old Norman or Scandinavian fashion of naming after the grandfather, and from Richard the Fearless downwards are Gilbert Fitz Richard and Richard Fitz Gilbert alternately—was the generally steady ally of De Montfort. He died in 1262. He was known as the old Earl of Gloucester, though he was forty when he died. His son Gilbert supported De Montfort also, fought at Lewes for the Barons, and was one of the rulers of the kingdom, as one of the three Electors, with De Montfort himself and the Bishop of Chichester as his colleagues, in the Earl of Leicester's short-lived constitutional scheme. He received a grant of Reigate and other lands taken from his rival De Warenne, who had fled the kingdom. The ancestral quarrel must have been made more bitter by the transaction. De Warenne was uncle to De Clare's wife, who was Yolande de Lusignan, daughter to the king's half-brother.

But the Earl of Gloucester changed sides. He quarrelled with De Montfort, joined Edward the king's son, and was the principal means for bringing about first the overthrow and then the composition with the remains of the baronial party. Indeed, throughout his life, he posed consistently as a very "candid friend" to Edward's government, holding a sort of "cross-bench" position in the politics of the day. He sorely tried the king's temper by exercising what he considered his right of private war in the Welsh marches against the Earl of Hereford. It was to attract so powerful and intractable a supporter more closely to the royal side that Edward gave him in marriage as second wife, the first being divorced, his daughter Joan of Acre. Earl Gilbert died in 1295. He was succeeded by his son, another Gilbert now, whose death at Bannockburn was a grievous blow to the power of his uncle Edward II. With him ended the male line of the De Clares. Blechingley ultimately passed through one of the co-heiresses to the

Staffords, Dukes of Buckingham. On the forfeiture of the last duke, under Henry VIII, the manor passed to the Crown. The castle was ruinous, and had, at some time, become separated from the rest of the manor.

So much briefly for the owners of Blechingley. It was their chief seat in Surrey; but their possessions were so extensive, and their castles so numerous and important, Caerphilly Castle, for instance, in South Wales, was and is one of the noblest monuments of feudal greatness in the country, that they probably only resided in Surrey for a short time every year. The great men of the thirteenth century travelled round from one of their manors to another. Their great train of dependents could not be easily supported continuously in one place, and the resources of each manor in turn were drawn upon. The "Rules of St. Robert," Robert Grosstête, Bishop of Lincoln, in the thirteenth century, a book on the management of estates, direct a lord to arrange every year, at Michaelmas, when he has before him the account of the produce of his various manors, how his sojourn among them is to be apportioned for the year following. So many weeks should be passed in each place, but so limited that no place is to be eaten quite bare. It was, of course, more easy to ride to stores of corn and cattle, than to get those stores carried about the country. So we may conjecture every year would see the Earl at Blechingley, with his Steward, Chamberlain, Treasurer, Seneschal, Chancellor, his clerks, and all the apparatus of administration of his earldom, modelled on the same lines as that of the kingdom. The head of a great estate of this kind had the necessary training for the conduct of the affairs of the country. The government could never be separated from the great earls without detriment. If the House of Commons, then coming into existence, was to be a useful adjunct to the government of the country, it, too, had to be in touch with the great earls, the natural political and local leaders. It was from considerations of this kind, no doubt, that Blechingley returned two members to the Parliaments of Edward I. It was not a big town, nor an important one,

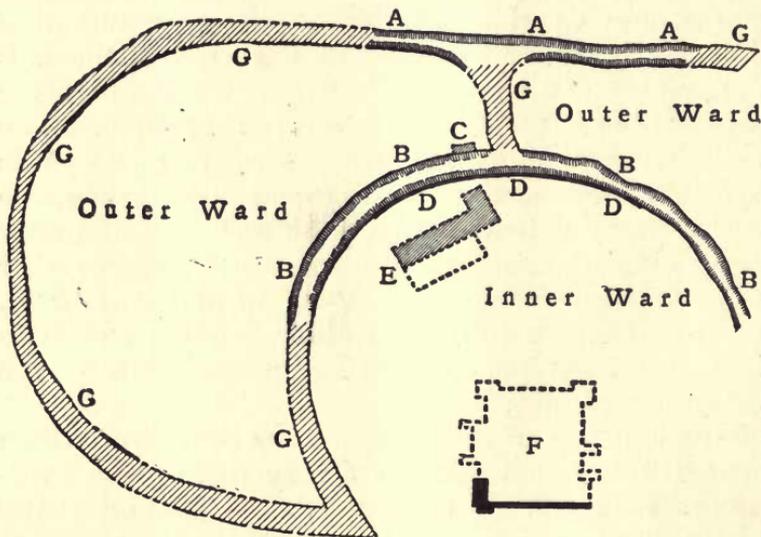
but the burgesses of Blechingley were really representatives of the De Clare interest in Surrey.

Which of the De Clares built Blechingley Castle is unknown. Manning and Bray's *History of Surrey* assigns it tentatively to Richard de Tonebridge, but it was more probably the work of one of his descendants in the latter part of the twelfth century. The remains are so much destroyed that no confident assertion of their date can be made, except within wide limits. When Aubrey saw the castle in 1673 a portion of wall was standing. Manning and Bray say that foundations only are visible. The keep has since their time been partially cleared of earth, but the task of conjectural restoration of its architecture has been rendered more difficult by an ill-advised and worse executed attempt to build up the loose stones into walls, and an arch, which latter is now tumbling down again. Since Manning and Bray wrote, the outworks have been still further destroyed by the building of a modern house upon the western part of them. The outer ditch runs under the extreme western part of this house. Red deer antlers were found in it when the house was lately extended in that direction. Manning and Bray give a plan, which apparently belongs rather to Aubrey's time than theirs, or even to an earlier date, for it shows some building standing. A copy of it is given on the next page, with the present state of the ground indicated also.

The castle occupies the very flat top of a brow which terminates to the southward in a very steep slope overhanging the Weald. To the north the ground slopes slightly upward from the castle works. To the east, two or three hundred yards away, a deep lane, deepened to make the slope easier in recent years, but always a ravine, runs up the hill from the Weald. Rather further away to the west an ancient trackway comes up a similar ravine. Neither ravine formed part of the defences, but they would hamper an assailant advancing along the edge of the hill from either side.

The works proper consisted of an outer ward surrounded by a ditch, and divided in two by a ditch,

joining the outer fosse with another ditch round the inner ward. The western part of the outer ward must have been rather the larger. This outer ditch may have been lined on the inside by a wall, but there seem to be no traces of it. Perhaps there was only a palisade. The inner ward is partly surrounded by a ditch, forming about two-thirds of the segment of a circle, joined in the middle and at the extremities with the outer ditch. There are traces of a bank or wall along the inside edge of this inner ditch. The part of the inner ward not covered by this ditch abuts upon the steep slope of the hill. Modern paths and planting make it impossible to say if the hill was artificially scarped or not. The ditch was probably wet. So far as it still exists it seems to be



- AAA. Outer Fosse still existing.
 BBB. Inner Fosse still existing.
 C. Traces of a small mound or building.
 DDD. Traces of wall or bank within the Inner Fosse.
 E. Building marked on the old plan, now destroyed.
 F. The Keep, the lower part of the walls only existing.
 GGG. Fosses marked on the old plan, now destroyed.

BLECHINGLEY CASTLE.

From the plan given in Manning and Bray's "History of Surrey," with indications of its present condition.

on the same level. Part of the outer ditch is damp even now in a dry summer. At Blechingley Mill, at a higher

level, there is a well whence water might have been pumped by a windmill to fill the ditch through pipes. That an enemy could cut this connexion is no objection to the theory. If he did it would not lay the ditch dry immediately. The very elaborate water defences of the De Clares' great castle at Caerphilly, and the wet ditch of Bodiam Castle in Sussex, could have been drained by an enterprising enemy with some skill in engineering. It was seldom that a mediæval castle was exposed to such an attack. If it could protect its inmates for a few days against the foray of a passing foe, whose commissariat arrangements, or want of arrangements, would not allow him to remain long before the walls, it had answered its usual purpose.

The plan marks a building in the inner ward, near where the inner and outer ditches are connected. No trace of this remains. It may have been a gate house. Just opposite to where it was, on the outer side of the inner ditch, is something like a small mound, which may mark the site of a barbican covering a bridge across the ditch to this gate house. In the inner ward, near the edge of the hill, decidedly south of the centre of the incomplete circle formed by the ditch, and nearer to the west than to the eastern side, is the keep, standing nearly square to the points of the compass. It is a small square Norman keep, with the common cross wall inside from north to south, which was useful, not only for supporting floors and roof, but for holding the whole building together. It has the usual angle turrets. The north-eastern contained a spiral staircase. There is a well, now quite dry, which likely enough was only a receptacle for rain water from the roofs. The argument against the keep being as early as the time of Richard de Tonebridge, such as it is, rests upon the appearance of some attempt at flanking defences. The ordinary corner turrets, such as those at Guildford or the Tower of London, are not flanking defences at all, but merely devices to strengthen the angles of the keep utilized for stairs or chambers. The flat pilasters which run up the face of most Norman keeps are merely structural

features. But so far as the angle turrets can be still traced they project considerably, for the size of the whole tower, and on the east and west faces there seem to have been solid projections with a much bolder profile than mere strengthening pilasters have, and from the top of those the bottom of the wall could be covered with stones or arrows. To compare a much greater and better preserved instance, these projections may be likened to the bold buttresses which rise round the tower of Conigsborough, an erection of probably 1163—1202, the time of Earl Hameline de Warenne, but certainly late Norman. Between two of these projections on the west side is a round-headed arch, which may be the doorway, not covered by any fore building. In the original state of the keep it would have been well above the ground level, but is too wide to be a window placed so low. I can advance nothing except conjecture founded upon these appearances, but from them I should rather suppose that the keep was built by Earl Roger of Clare and Hertford, 1152—1173,¹ or even by Richard, 1173—1217, the Earl of Gloucester of the Great Charter time.

But apart from the question of the stone keep, the date of the earthworks remains to be determined. The majority of castles in England built before or in the forty years after the Norman Conquest consisted of earthworks, banks and ditches, or mounds and ditches, palisaded and enclosing timber dwellings. The greater part of the inhabitants or garrison of such a castle as Blechingley would commonly be quartered in probably timber buildings inside the two wards. The keep when existing was the citadel, with no doubt the hall of state, the storeroom in the basement, often a small chapel, and a few rooms inside it, but it was not adapted for a large number of people in permanent occupation.

But the whole art of building stone castles of any kind was only recently introduced in Normandy itself when the Normans conquered England. The castles of

¹ Earl Roger breaks the sequence of Gilberts and Richards. He succeeded his brother Gilbert, he was the son of a Richard and the father of a Richard.

Britanny shown in the Bayeux Tapestry are timbered mounds.

Often English, Danes and Normans availed themselves of previously existing earthworks, and raised their mounds or planted their palisades within or upon Roman or British fortifications. But we may say of Blechingley that there is no trace of the central mound, the *Burh*, which is characteristic of early English strongholds, like Tamworth, or Arundel, or Guildford. Also the shape of the ditches is entirely unlike Roman earthworks, and not like the ordinary British earthworks either. The latter usually form two or three concentric rings, enclosing the summit of a hill, like Anstiebury or Cissbury. It would seem likely that the fortifications are entirely Norman in origin. The keep would, no doubt, be completed last, but whether the original design included the keep or not, there are no means of judging. The ditches, with banks and palisades or walls within them, would have formed a defensive position without the keep. But a keep seldom or never existed without such outworks round it.

Once only, so far as we know, does Blechingley Castle seem to have played any part in important military operations. In 1264, when the civil war between Henry III and the Barons had come to a head, the strife was decided in the south-eastern counties. The king, his son and brother, were in the Midlands, but their principal friends in England were divided into three distinct groups. There were certain northern barons who were with the king, but whose chief estates lay far away in the north. Secondly, there was a group of Welsh Marchers, who were counterbalanced by the great possessions of the De Clares, other Marchers, and Llewelyn of Wales in the same neighbourhood. Thirdly, there were the Earls De Warenne and of Arundel, with lordships in many parts of England, but specially strong in Surrey and Sussex. Lastly, there was a prospect of foreign help for the king. The barons commanded the only fleet, that of the Cinque Ports, were in possession of London, and were besieging Rochester where De Warenne

was shut up, intending thereby to secure the main road from Dover to London. The king evidently wished to master the south coast, by aid of De Warenne and Arundel, so as to join hands if possible with his friends across the Channel. The important coast castles of Arundel, Bramber, Lewes, Pevensey and Hastings were already in the hands of his friends.

He crossed the Thames at Kingston, and by approaching their communications with London forced the Barons to raise the siege of Rochester. He then took Tunbridge Castle and left a garrison there, and marched to the coast, finally concentrating at Lewes. De Montfort and De Clare, wishing to bring him to action, marched towards Lewes, halting at Fletching before the battle. They certainly came by the road through Croydon and Godstone into Sussex, which was not only their most direct way, but the safest, while Blechingley Castle, close to it, was held for their side. Everyone knows how they won a complete victory, and took the king and his son prisoners at Lewes. But had the fight gone otherwise the royalist party had laid their plans for the destruction of the Barons. The king's garrison sallied out from Tunbridge and came to the road by which their enemies had advanced, getting between them and London. They cut up the discomfited Londoners, who had been driven off the field at Lewes, and were retreating home despite the victory of their side, and according to tradition they likewise took and dismantled Blechingley Castle. Had the Barons got the worst of it at Lewes, they would have been cut off from their base. As it was the Tunbridge garrison could do no more, and marched off west, I suppose by the Pilgrim's Way. The alleged dismantling of Blechingley Castle on this occasion is not impossible, for it may have been only slenderly garrisoned, the Barons wanting all their available men in the field, but it is not recorded by the actually contemporary writers. At any rate such a passing force could hardly bring about the destruction of the castle. That was probably done, after it had become neglected, by all who wanted to build houses, churches, barns or stone walls in the neighbourhood of Blechingley.