

Usk Castle Friends Newsletter Summer 2020

Greetings from our Chairman Elizabeth Baker



At the last AGM I was able to thank and congratulate the Committee on the programme drawn up for the forthcoming year, a good balance of talks, a conference and events. I left looking forward to celebrating our twentieth year. Of course, within a few weeks all had changed and this will be remembered in our annals as the year of postponement. However, we've been busy organising our 21st birthday and have an even fuller programme on offer, keeping our original commitments and adding more. We have a good year in prospect and are grateful to all of our supporters for their loyalty.

Elizabeth Baker

Meanwhile, up at the Castle, some sheep have been home-schooling during the lockdown. They weren't too good at social distancing and Rosie thinks there may have been some hygiene problems

Elizabeth de Burgh Day

This was originally planned for April this year and postponed until the Autumn. In view of anxiety about covid-19 it has now been re-arranged for April 24th next year. To whet our appetites, our two speakers John Grove and Paul Dryburgh have generously sent brief accounts of what they are planning to cover.

John Grove writes:

Thanks to the accomplished research and lively novels of mainly female authors, the story of many significant women of the medieval period is emerging. Usk Castle certainly had its share of notable female occupants, who did far more in shaping history than has been generally recognised. The stories of Isabella Marshall, Joan of Acre, and Elizabeth de Burgh are all worth telling. From the annual conference of Usk Castle Friends of 2002, and the inspiring lecture of Dr. Jennifer Ward, Elizabeth de Burgh has been given an honoured place in Usk's estimation. By the age of 27, Elizabeth had experienced three marriages ending in the death of each husband. She had come into possession of Usk Castle, and lost it due to the machinations of King Edward II. How she recovered it and administered great estates successfully, humanely and piously in Wales, England and Ireland, centred on her homes at Clare and Usk Castles, will be one of the subjects of our 2021 annual

conference. She also founded Clare College, Cambridge, and lived till the age of 65, full of good works and with a high reputation.

Paul Dryburgh writes

On 2 October 1326, King Edward II and a small group of his closest associates left the Tower of London in a state of panic and confusion. In the past week the King learned that his wife, Queen Isabella and her probable lover Roger Mortimer, Lord of Wigmore, had faced no opposition to their invasion of England at the head of a small army of emigrés. Edward hoped in vain to raise an army in Wales to combat this threat. Within six weeks, however, the king was in his wife's custody and both Hugh Despensers, father and son, his henchmen, had been brutally and publicly executed. By the end of January of the new year, Edward had been deposed – or rather forced to abdicate – in the first deposition of a post-Conquest English king. In this talk, I want to explore how the reign of an anointed king could have come to such a swift end. I will discuss new, currently unpublished evidence recently found at The National Archives to show the practical measures taken by the queen and her party to take over and manage royal government; in so doing, I want to examine the crucial, under-appreciated role the Lady of Usk, Elizabeth de Burgh, had played during the crisis.

Elizabeth de Burgh and Llangybi

Many members will be familiar with the connection between Usk Castle and Elizabeth de Burgh. But there is another castle, not far away, at Tregrug (Llangybi) where she and her family sometimes spent the summer months. She had inherited Tregrug from Matilda, Gilbert de Clare's widow, along with the Lordship of Usk. Now a ruin, it is usefully described in Paul Davies's book *The Forgotten Castles of Wales*, drawing on earlier work by Rick Turner and others. Tregrug was conceived on a very large scale by the de Clares, much grander than Usk or Caerleon. The courtyard alone covered three acres. Elizabeth commissioned large residential buildings there in 1341-2. The castle was an impressive rural retreat exhibiting the great wealth of the de Clares. It was a strong defensive castle but by this time it was probably used mainly as a hunting lodge and a rural retreat. The conjectural drawing is similar to that in Davies's book (p. 165). The Great Gatehouse is at the bottom of the picture and the tower on the left is a keep-like structure known as the Lord's Tower.



Elizabeth de burgh and The Black Death

Elizabeth de Burgh can hardly be blamed for the Black Death which originated in China and spread across Europe to reach England in 1348. However, it was carried by a ship from Gascony which arrived at Melcombe in Dorset (now Weymouth) bringing the plague with it. The port was owned by Elizabeth and it was probably brought into the country by one of her boats. The Pestilence swept across Europe between 1346 and 1353 and probably led to fifty million deaths. Petrarch could not have known about covid-19 when he wrote "O happy posterity, who will not

experience such abysmal woe and will look upon our testimony as a fable"



Castle works as reported by Rosie Humphreys in May.

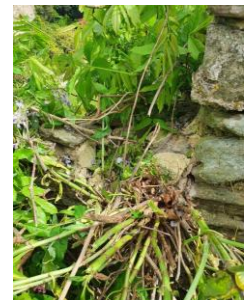
This year's conservation project has started: the scaffolding is up on the Dovecote Tower. You may have noticed it from Twyn Square. The object is to take down and restore the top layers of corbelling and to secure the saddle stones, protecting the structure from water ingress. The

photo to the left shows the top, looking north which has been badly damaged by weeds, mostly by the very common *Red Valerian*. The photo below shows how bad the root damage can be.



Nature Note

Red valerian is not to be confused with *Valerian Officinalis* which is used for herbal treatments. To quote Culpeper on the latter "the roots of Valerian have a strong, and to most people, a disagreeable smell.....there is no doubt but it possesses anti-spasmodic virtues in a very



eminent degree.....and there are instances of its having effected cures in obstinate epileptic cases". Valeric acid occurs both in the plant and in human perspiration. Cats are attracted by the smell and react in the same way as they do to cat mint. See Inky (left), the Castle House cat, on the Tower.

Important dates for 2021

Elizabeth de Burgh Day
Alison Neil on Edith Nesbit
Margaret Beaufort Day.
Visits

April 24th
May 28th
September 2021 (date to be confirmed)
Dates to be arranged

Nicola Tallis *The Uncrowned Queen, The Fateful Life of Margaret Beaufort, Tudor Matriarch*. 2019

As Nicola Tallis is to be one of our main speakers in 2021, I thought members might like to know



about her recent book on Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry VII. The book covers the whole of Beaufort's life from her birth in 1443 to her death in 1509, slightly after that of her beloved son, King Henry VII. Her parents were the Duke and Duchess of Somerset and the young Margaret was a valuable prize as the sole legitimate heir to her father's vast estates. Though she underwent a form of marriage with John de la Pole, her first true husband was Edmund Tudor, a half brother of King Henry VI. Her own fate thereafter was greatly influenced by the swings and roundabouts of what became known as

the Wars of the Roses. She gave birth to Henry at the age of thirteen, clearly a traumatic experience and had no further children. In spite of long separations, the bond between her and her son remained strong. After the Lancastrians' defeat at the battle of Tewkesbury Henry was in great danger and fled with his uncle Jasper Tudor to Pembroke and thence to France. Henry was safe but exiled so, again, he and his mother would not be able to meet for some years. Margaret was now fifty-eight and became a widow for the second time at the death of Stafford of whom she was very fond. Aware of her vulnerable position she found a husband close to the Yorkist court, Thomas Stanley. Meanwhile Henry was languishing under the care of Duke Francis of Brittany and both Edward IV, and later Richard III tried to lure him back to England. Margaret warned him against returning. It was at this time that she plotted the marriage of Henry to Elizabeth of York. Margaret's marriage to Stanley probably saved her from execution after Buckingham's failed rebellion. In 1484, in Rheims Cathedral, Henry pledged to marry Elizabeth of York and overthrow Richard III and in the following year he landed at Milford Haven ready to take the throne. The rest is history...as it were.

This takes us only halfway through Nicola Tallis's book. Arguably the architect of Henry's success, she continued to exercise great influence during his reign, known as My Lady, the King's Mother. Like her son she was constantly vigilant about threats from remaining Yorkists though not influential enough to prevent the execution of her husband's brother, William Stanley, for treason. On other matters Henry constantly trusted her. She was greatly enthusiastic about the marriage of Prince Arthur and Katherine of Aragon and was devastated by Arthur's death, though there is little evidence that she continued to support Katherine in her years of neglect. Margaret had great personal wealth so was financially independent of her son, holding a splendid personal court of her own at Collyweston. Her wealth enabled her to be a great patron of printing and of learning and to found two Cambridge Colleges, Christ's and St John's. She was deeply religious and set up various chantries to ensure that prayers would be said in perpetuity for herself and the Tudor dynasty. Hers was a great life but had Henry not become King, I suspect that she would now be merely a footnote to the twists and turns of the Cousins' Wars. *David Collard*.

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