

Three Castles in the Monnow Valley

An excursion to Skenfrith Castle White Castle and Grosmont Castle

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On a near perfect day we gathered at Skenfrith Castle, near Monmouth, for a tour of the Three Castles by the Forest of Dean and Wye Valley Tour Guides.

Today, the area is tranquil pastoral country with a patchwork quilt of small hedged fields, interspersed with clumps of woodland, a hilly terrain and fast flowing streams. Nine hundred years ago it was the most turbulent of the Welsh Marches covering the route between South Wales and Herefordshire. The list of castles guarding this communication route is substantial and their remains are a magnet to crowds of visitors. By the mid 15th Century, a few decades after the suppression of the Owain Glyndwr Rebellion, the castles were generally in decline, although some played a role in the Wars of the Roses and the Civil War. They seem to have been maintained until around 1450 but thereafter were disused, being described in the reign of Henry VIII as being in a state of decay, and in the early 17th Century as ruinous and decayed time out of the memory of man.

All three Castles were Norman/Marcher Lord intrusions in a totally Welsh environment. As foreign interlopers they controlled the people, the land and its resources. They were originally of timber and earth construction and were gradually rebuilt in Old Red Devonian Sandstone from the late 12th Century to the mid 13th Century. In each case they were successively brought up-to-date by the construction of large circular towers on each angle of their curtain walls, strengthened gateways and improved domestic accommodation.

Skenfrith is unusual in being built on low lying flat land. It is an irregular rectangle with towers to provide covering fire, a flooded moat, a round keep, and what appears to be a weakly defended gateway. There are other examples of round keeps in the southern Marches, such as Pembroke, and Longtown under the lea of the Black Mountains. Compared to traditional square keeps they were more resistant to mining and rams, and gave better fields of fire. Entry was on the first floor and a

Figure 1
The BACAS group at Grosmont Castle.



battered base provided the opportunity for missiles to ricochet when dropped from the battlement wooden hoardings. The arrow slits, like those at White Castle, have horizontal loops at different heights to accommodate longbow men and crossbow men, or perhaps to suit vertically challenged archers. There is evidence of a quay on the Monnow though it is difficult to imagine craft progressing against the flow on the Monnow or Wye.

Thence to Grosmont which, despite its present image as a small village, was an important medieval borough with a mayor and corporation. The castle is sited on a rocky knoll surrounded by a deep dry moat. Grosmont is a compact structure but it was encompassed by an outer ward of which only traces remain. The original castle featured a late 12th Century stone hall with timber / earth defences. These defences were replaced in stone around 1230. It was further modified in the 14th Century when the towers and gatehouse were greatly strengthened. It is apparent from the Great Hall and the 14th Century North Block that Grosmont possessed the best high status accommodation, and it was a favourite of the Earls (later Dukes) of Lancaster. It also seems to have seen the most military action, having witnessed the flight of Henry III in 1233 dressed in his night clothes when attacked at night by a rebellious Marcher lord – Richard Marshall. It saw action twice during the Glyndwr Rebellion in 1404 and 1405. What history does not record are the many skirmishes and ambushes which were part and parcel of Marcher existence.

Lunch was taken at the Angel at Skenfrith. It is a community pub and managed with cheerful enthusiasm by the villagers, where we enjoyed an excellent repast before departing for White Castle.

White Castle represents the most traditional of the three, with high curtain walls, set with dominating towers, giving it a thoroughly martial and grim appearance. It was by far the most powerful, but stark in comparison to the comforts of Grosmont. It comprises three elements; a huge well fortified outer ward suitable for the mustering of an army, an inner ward surrounded by a very deep water-filled moat with a curtain wall girded with strong circular towers. Two large four storey circular towers flank the gateway and, finally, a crescent shaped hornwork which protected the original entrance. In one of the periodic updates, the castle entrance was turned 180 degrees. Unlike Skenfrith or Grosmont castles, White Castle sits in splendid bucolic isolation which probably explains why there has been less stone robbing.

Figure 2

White Castle the most traditional of the three castles visited by the group.

