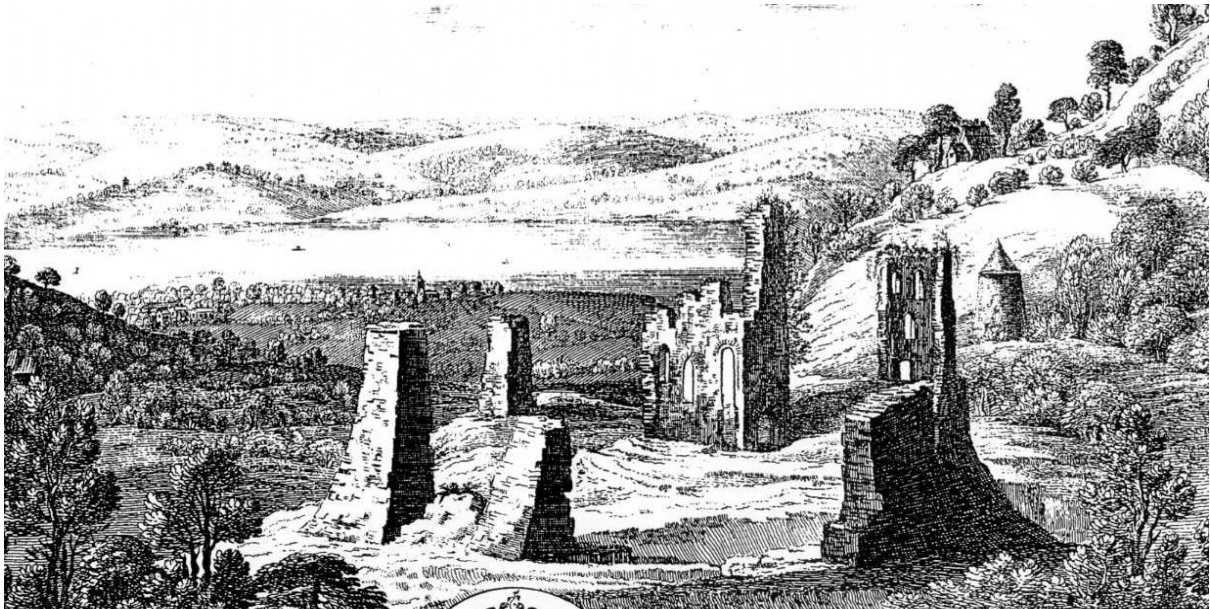


A Secret Castle in the Usk Valley

David Morgan

A secret castle in the Usk valley? Really? Many people may have seen it on a map and wondered, but fewer will have seen the real thing. It is the castle of Blaenllynfi¹, not far outside Bwlch, and it was once one of the most important castles in the area and the *caput* of a lordship. It lies at the southern end of the Llynfi valley, the northern approach to which was guarded by Bronllys castle and Castell Dinas. This was, for a long time, the main route to the Usk valley and Brecon from the north-east, since both the Struet and Cerrig-Cochion hill in Brecon presented substantial gradients for horse-drawn traffic.



Print of Blaenllynfi castle by Nathaniel and Samuel Buck (1741), with Llangorse Lake in the background.

The castle is first recorded in 1215, and what little stonework remains suggests that it may have been built about then. It appears to have changed ownership a number of times as the political influence of various families, or their favour with the king, rose or fell, and after 1310, when it ceased to be the permanent residence of the fitz Herbert line, it was probably cared for by successive caretaker constables and custodians. By 1337 it seems to have gone downhill, as a crown survey of that year records that at least fourteen internal

¹ Blaenllynfi is the current name but, over the centuries since the castle was built, it has often been known as Blaenllyfni; this spelt in various ways.



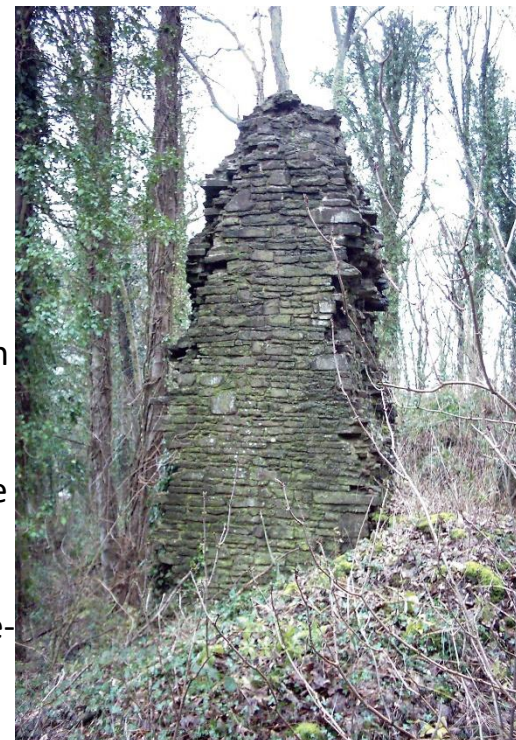
The Ordnance Survey 1st Edition map 1830 -33 showing the castle, ringed in red

buildings were either suffering rotting timbers or had fallen down completely. In 1403, the castles of Crickhowell, Castell Dinas and Tretower were ordered to be provisioned against the Glyndwr rebellion but Blaenllynfi was not mentioned, so perhaps it was already derelict by that time. Leland (circa 1536) says that above Llangorse Lake (there) "is yet the shape of a veri fair castel now dekeiying", and it was clearly a complete ruin by the time of the Buck Brothers' print. There is no firm evidence that the castle saw any military activity.

The castle is to the north of the main road through Bwlch, now the A40(T), and just west of the road from Bwlch to Llangorse . It sits on a roughly rectangular artificial

earthwork about 120metres across at its widest extent, made up of material thrown up from the surrounding ditch.

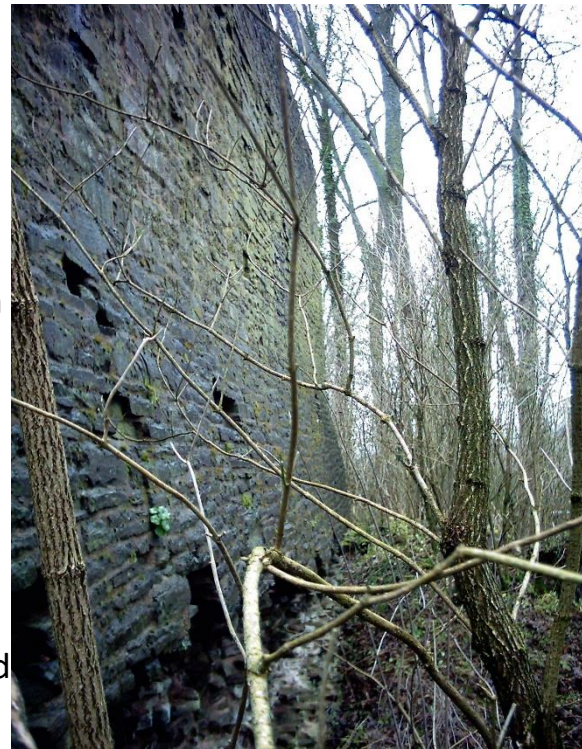
The surviving stonework inside is fragmentary, the best preserved parts being four buttresses and a section of curtain wall, which still stand to the height as excavated by the then owner from the 1960s on. Some work was continued by others until 1986 with the aim of uncovering such walling as remained, but subsequently the site rapidly became overgrown once more. It was surveyed in detail by Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust in 1990 and over the next few years, the visible remains were made secure. Since then scrub and trees have continued to colonise the site. It is difficult to make sense of the measured ground plan, and the records of the earlier excavations do not permit a comprehensive analysis of the whole site. With the exception of the free-standing buttresses and the section of curtain wall, few walls remain much higher than a metre and some are invisible under vegetation. Clearly more than one phase of building and rebuilding was involved, but the



One of the surviving buttresses, still standing about 5 metres high

fragmentary remains and the absence of further detailed investigation and excavation leave many questions unanswered.

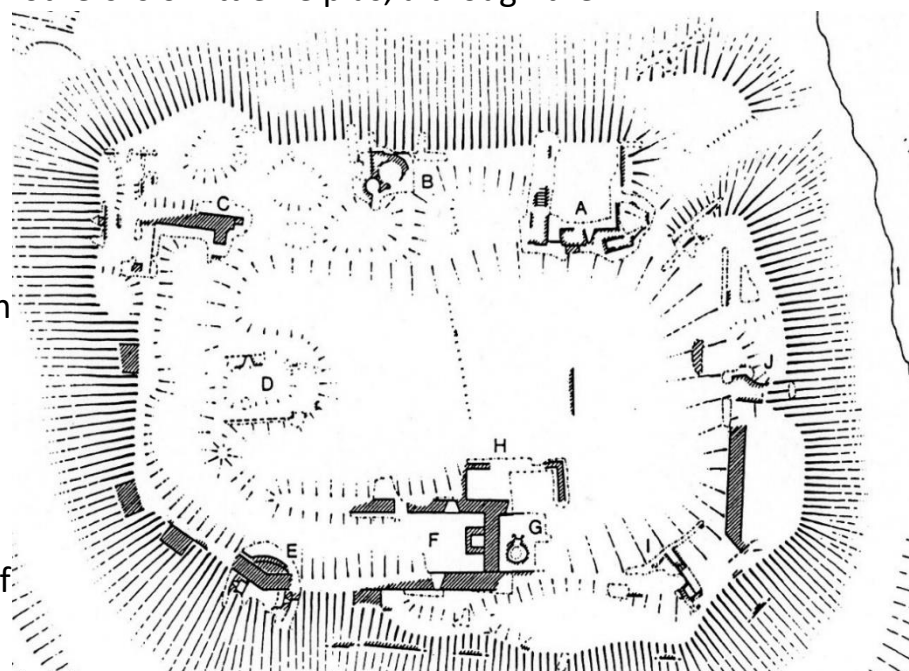
The presence of buttresses to the curtain wall may indicate that the latter was already becoming unstable. The circular tower at the South corner (E on the plan) also shows clear signs of alteration. Originally, it probably straddled the perimeter wall, but at some point it was reinforced by casing on the inside (was the tower already insecure?). Finally it was scrapped and the rebuilt curtain wall passed straight across it. Since most of the outside half is missing, the excavators reasonably assumed that it had collapsed. However, determined searching failed to find any fragments of it, so another possibility is that it was deliberately dismantled, or plundered for building stone either then or later.



The remaining section of curtain wall, about 7 metres high

The likely entrance at the North corner is another puzzle. It appears to be set almost diagonally in the corner, but the two sides at present apparent do not match each other. Indeed, one of the first excavators thought that the entrance might instead be close to the West corner. The print by the Buck Brothers is of little help as, although the depiction of Llangorse lake in the background indicates the direction of the view, it is difficult to make complete sense of the picture - the two tall buildings in the print cannot be securely identified in the existing remains.

There are earthworks outside the castle on the NW side, but they are confusing and are complicated by the presence of a saw-mill in the nineteenth century, with its attendant mill-pond (now dried up) and sluice



Ground plan of the existing remains, with North at the top right corner. The site measures approximately 120 metres across.

gate and outfall. Some of the banks may be spoil heaps from the construction of this, or dumps from the archaeological excavations. It has been suggested that the area might have been part of a castle garden, or perhaps fishponds, though neither possibility can be substantiated. It is unlikely that they could have formed an outer bailey to the castle, since they would tend to weaken the defensive capability of the castle on that side. There is also the occasional reference in the documentation to a "borough" of Blaenllynfi, but there is no sign of a nucleated settlement in the immediate vicinity - the village of Bwlch nearby is a function of the enclosure of common land from the 17th century onwards - so it may have been a dispersed one.

The castle was scheduled as an Ancient Monument as long ago as 1927, and is privately owned. Clearance work is ongoing, to be followed by further excavation and consolidation, though this is at present hampered by the coronavirus restrictions. It is intended that the site will be open to the public when the work is finished, but until then there is no public access.



Ruins of the Blaen Lleveny Castle. Watercolour painted by John "Warwick" Smith in June 1790 on one of his frequent visits to Wales. From this painting, the Buck print, and other 18th Century artworks, it is evident that, during this period, the ruins were clearly visible and the castle a recognized tourist site

The ground plan and some of the information in this article are taken from the unpublished survey of the site by Dr. R.J.Silvester and Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust.