

Dinas Brân Castle



Dinas Brân Castle today.

Towering high above Llangollen stands Castell Dinas Brân (known to the local population as Crow Castle). Rich in history, the site was originally occupied by one of the many Iron Age hill-forts found in the Dee Valley. Two thousand years after the Iron Age, the site was chosen for its defensive value and its imposing nature by Gruffydd ap Madog, ruler of Powys Fadog (Northern Powys) between about 1236 and 1270.

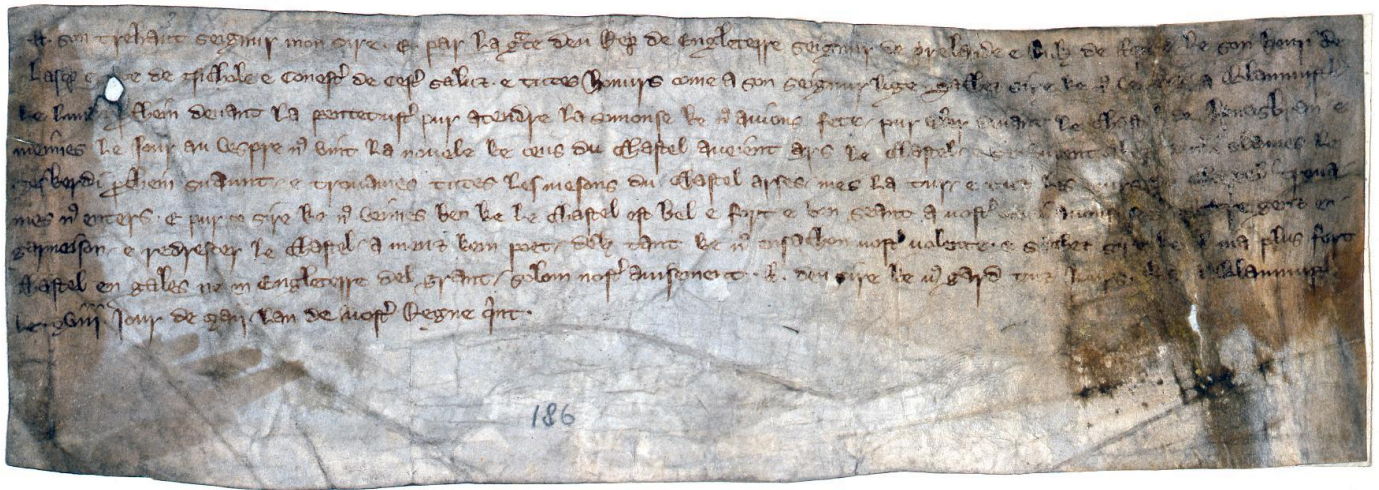
It is possible that an earlier timber castle existed on the site, maybe even dating back to the Norman conquest of Wales, but there is no evidence for this.

During the 13th Century there was much dispute between the Welsh Princes and the English Kings, culminating in the conquest by Edward I. When the English commander Henry de Lacy, Earl of Lincoln, led an expedition against Dinas Brân in May 1277, the Welsh defenders deliberately set fire to the castle in order to prevent it falling into English hands.

Although the wooden buildings within the castle walls were destroyed the “tower” or keep and all of the stone walls remained intact.



*Dinas Brân Castle as it may have looked.
Courtesy of Denbighshire Countryside Service.*



Letter from Henry de Lacey to Edward I concerning Dinas Brân.

In a letter that Henry sent to Edward I, he said “the fortress is still so good and strong and should be repaired and garrisoned by the English. For there is no stronger castle in all Wales, nor has England a stronger”.

Persuaded by this enthusiastic advice Edward took personal ownership of Dinas Brân. He repaired and added on to the castle, also stationing a Garrison there.

It is unknown what part the castle played in the Anglo-Welsh war that erupted in March 1282. This conflict saw the death of Prince Llywellyn “The Last”, the extinction of Powys Fadog and a total English Victory. The castle may at some point have fallen into Welsh hands, but by October 1282 it was obviously back under English control. Having defeated the Welsh, Edward presented the castle to his general John de Warenne, Earl of Surrey. However, deciding it's location too inaccessible and too remote, de Warenne abandoned Castell Dinas Brân and went on to build and live in Holt Castle.

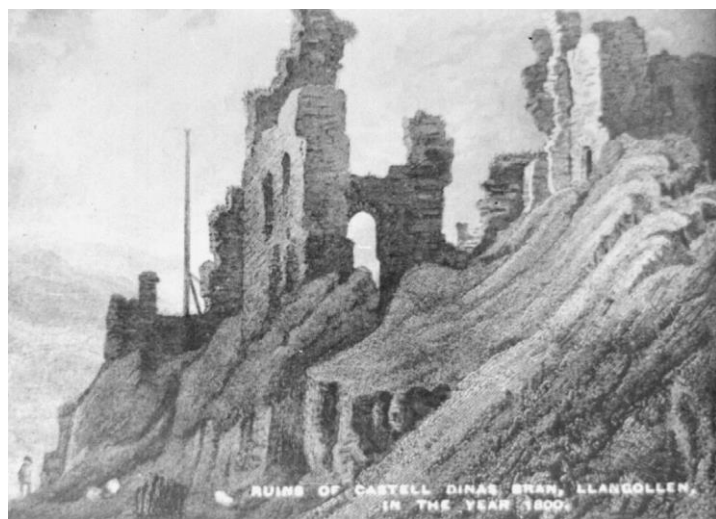


John de Warrenne.

Abandoned and left to the elements, the castle weathered away for centuries, with people giving it little attention. In 1490 John Leland said: “*The castelle of Dinas Brane was never bigge thing, but sette al for strength as in a place half inaccessible for ennemyes. It is now al in ruine: and there in the rok side that the castelle stondith on bredith every yere an egle. And the egle doth sorely assaut hym that distroith the nest.*”



A map of the Myddelton estates, surveyed in 1799, shows the 74 acres of the Castle land marked as green, and identified with the letter F, indicating in the key that this area was Waste Land. The tithe maps from around 1840 also mark the area as Common Land, meaning that it was open to everyone to use. It does, however, appear to have belonged at some point to the Myddeltons of Chirk Castle.



The ruined castle in 1800.

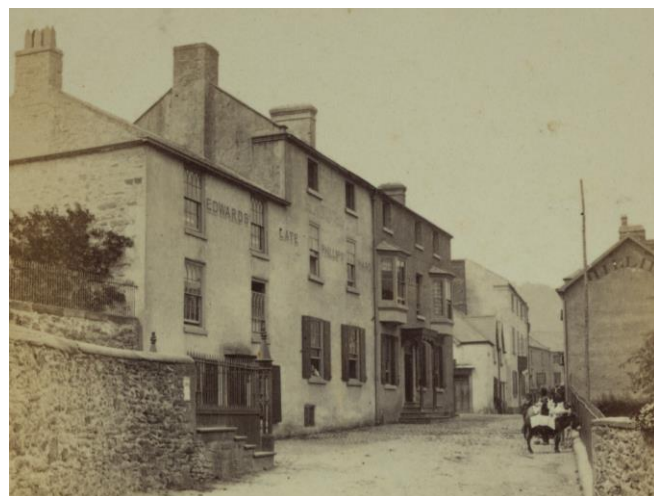


The camera Obscura and the small shop on top of Dinas Brân.

The little shop was taken over in the early 1900s by Miss Elizabeth Roberts, who also installed a camera obscura to entice visitors to take advantage of the views of the surrounding valley. Supplies for the shop were carried up the hill in panniers on a donkey.



The introduction of the railway to Llangollen in the second half of the nineteenth century, however, created an influx of tourists to the town. The castle, and the climb to it, became one of the main attractions.



Donkeys used to take visitors up to the Castle, tethered outside the Hand Hotel.

Seeing potential, the locals created a small business by renting out donkeys to those daunted by the steep climb. In the 1880s Mr Samuel Jones built a small 'cottage' on the top from which he sold supplies to visitors.



Elizabeth Roberts, on the left, possibly with nephews and nieces, outside the café at the Castle (above) and Raymond Gale leads the donkey outside the cafe (left).



Peggy Chubb and another lady taking supplies up to the shop by donkey.



Peggy Chubb watches her dog share a drink with the donkey on the top.

The camera obscura was an octagonal metal structure, with a rotating lens protruding from the top, that focussed a picture of the surrounding countryside onto a viewing screen inside. In his book *An Illustrated History of Llangollen*, Gordon Sherratt recounts the story of a local lady who, to entertain her guests, proposed a gentle walk up Dinas Brân to enjoy the entertainment provided by the camera obscura. The day being very fine, there was certain to be a clear view all around. Too clear in fact! To her consternation, and the embarrassment of her guests, the camera showed a picture of her daughter, reclining in the heather with the local curate. The shop is long gone and the camera obscura blew away in a gale in the 1950s.



The well excavated at Dinas Brân Castle in May 1970.



Workers on top of Dinas Brân with a caterpillar vehicle in 1970.

In 1970, work was carried out to consolidate some of the structure of the Castle. At that time the workers opened up the well at the top, as well as restoring some of the stone work.

The first ever archaeological investigation at Dinas Bran was conducted by CPAT in August 2021, when four hand-dug trial trenches were undertaken internally within the eastern end of the southern gatehouse, and externally at its western end and northern side.

Visit <https://heneb.org.uk/project/castell-dinas-bran-llangollen-2/> for details.

Heneb (the new name for CPAT) revisited Dinas Brân Castle in September and October 2025 and carried out further excavations to try and reveal more detail of not just the Castle, but also the Iron Age hill fort

Visit Llangollen Museum's Facebook page for photographs and the dig diary at:-

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02tzQgsigVdrCsF8s8MkwRpL3oWoaJTU9GKm_dReLm975AAydXUwpsd2ZuE4TycUBNAI&id=100057657969751



Heneb are currently interpreting the results and finds, and so very likely, more will need to be added to this history!