

KANSAS REVEALS SECRETS OF 17TH CENTURY HEREFORDSHIRE

Research by W Richard Delahay



Urishay Castle in 1865

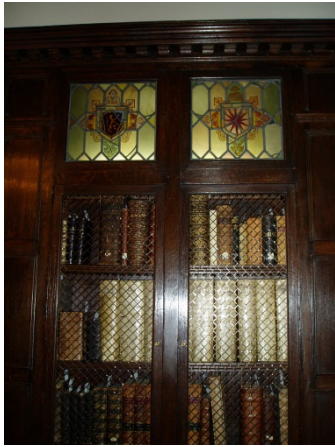
The castles along the English / Welsh border are well known for their roles as English strongholds during the 11th and 12th centuries, but it may come as a surprise to learn that, five hundred years later, a role reversal occurred, whereby one castle chose to overlay its English heritage with a celebration of the Welsh rulers who were persistent in their attempts to expand to the east.

URISHAY CASTLE IS DEMOLISHED

This historical interpretation starts with the harsh economic climate of 1913 which had depressed English agriculture to the extent that many rural estates were sold to sitting tenants or auctioned to salvage companies, in an attempt to offset escalating expenses.

Urishay Castle, situated in the Golden Valley at Peterchurch, later achieved the infamy in 1919 to 1921, of being Herefordshire's first manor to be demolished in this period, and as a result, its stylish Jacobean drawing room started on its tortuous journey into the history books.

THE JACOBEOAN PANELLED ROOM GOES ON DISPLAY



Stained glass windows set high in the walls



Carved over-mantle with pedestals and pilasters

The oak panelled room, almost 20 feet square, complete with its doors, carved over-mantle and coloured glass windows, was re-erected in the Knightsbridge Halls, London, and offered for re-sale to a world-wide audience.

Its first significant destination was to be Marshall Fields, the Chicago department store, where it was pressed into service as an authentic backdrop for the store's display of antique furniture.

Around this time, American museums were keen to show off "British history", and after being in a prominent position in Marshall Fields for approximately 6 years, the drawing room was acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago, where it was on display as a Jacobean oak panelled room.



Pilaster detail



Carved frieze and cornice

THE WAR YEARS

By the mid 1930s, the enthusiastic aggregation of panelled rooms from Europe had saturated the American museum environment such that a measure of off-loading became inevitable, and the drawing room from Urishay Castle later found itself preserved in crates in the basement of the Art Institute of Chicago.

There the Herefordshire treasure languished during World War 2 and its 15 year aftermath, whilst market forces diverted collector's interests towards more immediate needs.

RESURRECTION

In 1962, the drawing room re-emerged from its storage crates, having been purchased by benefactor Helen Spencer for donation to Baker University, Kansas. This generous action was organised to coincide with the re-housing of the William Quayle Rare Bible collection, which also formed part of the University's collection. A custom-built extension was added to the new Spencer wing and the Urishay panelled room was installed in a temperature controlled environment adjacent to the Bible display.

RE-DISCOVERY AND REVELATION

It was in 2007 on a visit to Kansas to view the exhibit from the 17th century manor house, that I hugged the walls in search of "voices from the past". Instead of voices, the stained glass windows set high in the oak walls presented a puzzle awaiting interpretation.

Of the six coats of arms so beautifully presented, only one was immediately recognisable, that being the pointed red sun of the 12th Century Lord of the Manor John de la Hay.



Research revealed that the other five mystery coats of arms celebrated the Welsh rulers and their homelands, who had led their clans to battle against the English throughout the Welsh Marches in earlier centuries.

They were Deheubarth (An area in medieval South Wales), Lestyn ap Gwryant (Welsh ruler of Morganwg), Llywelyn (the Royal House of Gwynedd), Gruffydd ap Cynan (Aberffraw dynasty), and Owain Gwynedd (Grandfather to Owain Glyndwr, Llywelyn the Great).

Other visuals, such as those associated with nearby influential manors in Ewyas Lacy and Snodhill, were conspicuous by their absence, as were the composite quadrants that typically signified family marriages.

The five coats of arms on display clearly acclaimed the Welsh leaders of the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries.

But the existence of these Welsh coats of arms, displayed so prominently in the Urishay Room, required deeper examination if an explanation for their presence was to be found.

Two relevant discoveries emerged;

.....firstly, Urishay Castle was rebuilt as a manor house in the 17th century and would have reflected the Lord of the Manor's desire to make a statement about his politics, heritage and position in society.

.....secondly, Lord of the Manor of the Urishay Estate at this time, Thomas Delahay, was of predominantly Welsh descent and the family held a handful of estates in the vicinity of the Welsh Marches.

We are therefore led to the conclusion that the stained glass windows featuring in the rebuild were a celebration of Welsh history, Welsh command of Urishay, and Welsh aspirations for the future.

And so Urishay Castle, originally one in the north / south border line of English strongholds, came to demonstrate a Welsh allegiance. Was this a controversial statement in 17th Century Herefordshire ? Quite possibly it was, although the subtle visuals displayed in the drawing room would have ensured the message reached only those who were invited in.

Welsh domination of the Urishay Estate continued through the 17th, 18th and most of the 19th centuries.

Currently, the Urishay Room is used for lectures and choral events, and is said to “glow with pride” when it is filled with an appreciative audience.

Being adjacent the Quayle Rare Bible collection, many of these events in 2011 were associated with the 400th anniversary of the 1611 publication of the King James version of the Bible.

Baker University, Kansas, is to be applauded for the care and attention lavished on the Urishay Room, ensuring its preservation for the pleasure of future generations.

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The author dedicates this article to Alice, Lucy and Thomas, who are

17th generation descendants in a line that can be traced to the 13th Century.

Acknowledgements

The illustration of Urishay Castle is by Lady Francis Vernon Harcourt in 1865. Ref: A History of the Castles of Herefordshire and their Lords, by the Rev Charles Robinson, M.A. MDCCCLXIX.

Photographs of the interior of the Jacobean Room are with permission of Quayle Bible Collection, Baldwin City, KS, USA.



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