

A strange little castle surrounded by sand-hills and mystery.

CANDLESTON CASTLE



The oddly named Candleston Castle stands at the end of an attractive country lane leading from the picture-postcard village of Merthyr Mawr into the former sand dune waste which separates it from the coast. In my childhood it was a favourite walk of my father's, though one about which I personally had rather mixed feelings. Whilst an attractive enough location in itself Candleston was, to a lad little more than a toddler, set in a rather strange, unnerving landscape. Suddenly, almost as though cut by a knife, the soft, pleasant greens of woods and fields gave way to an arid sandy desert marked only by the boles and branches of a few dead and dying trees. Separating these starkly different worlds lay the Candleston Brook, sometimes forcing its way sluggishly onwards through the sand towards the river; at others totally vanishing or else mysteriously appearing and disappearing at different locations along its bed. The other thing I recall is the silence. The vast swathe of sand and adjoining woodland seemed to absorb all sound, and in my memory not even a bird sang.

Today, fifty years on, the open spaces of the dunes that I remember has largely been replaced by a claustrophobic blanket of sea buckthorn through which access is restricted to narrow alleys of leathery, spiky greenery - paths kept open only by the constant passage of ramblers and joggers. In adult life I confess I find its all-pervading presence an even more unnerving feature than the previous desolation.

On a spur overlooking the car park which marks the terminus of the lane from Merthyr Mawr stand the ruins of Candleston Castle, now the only evidence that this strange environment was ever considered an attractive environment for human settlement. Back in the Medieval Period it was in fact the manor house to a small village called Candleston (or in Welsh "Tregantlow") which stood part-way up the slope on the opposite side of the valley and a little further upstream. Today there is no visible sign of it, and the same is probably now true of the stump of its windmill on the summit which, when I last visited it, was on the point of being engulfed by the all-pervading buckthorn.



Very little is known of the origin and history of this former community, and even its name is a matter of some debate. It used to be thought that it derived from De Cantelupe, an early Norman family that were probably the first lords here. Professor Gwynedd O. Pierce however has recently pointed out in his book *“Place-Names in Glamorgan”* (2002) that although the Cantelupes are mentioned in South East Wales in the 12th century, there is no record of them in this particular area, and the earliest documentary reference he had been able to discover of “Candleston” does not occur until as late as the 14th century.

It is probably also not a coincidence therefore that according to those better versed in architecture than I, that the castle as it now appears seems to have been built in the late 14th century - a century or so after the great era of castle building in South Wales had come to an end. So why then was a fortification built in this secluded spot at such a time?

To that simple question there are no easy answers, and my own solution is only a suggestion based largely upon the ruins as they appear today, for Candleston is not what I would call a “real” castle. Basically it is a well-appointed and substantial manor house to which some trappings of a defensive nature have been added. Principally the latter comprise a square stone tower on the south-west corner and a semi-circular courtyard with battlemented wall and a wall-walk on the west. Behind the house the land rises making it the vulnerable quarter to attack, yet there is no trace of any defensive structures on this side.



It therefore seems significant that the two defensive elements – tower and wall – are placed so that they could be seen from the Merthyr Mawr lane which, as it happens, has not always ended at Candleston but in the past was been a road of some importance. During the medieval period and prior to the sand encroachment it continued from here on to Newton (Porthcawl), where there was a small harbour which, following the foundation of the new town of Bridgend in the 15th century supplied it with manufactured and luxury goods from the City of Bristol. One of the last travellers along it in 1538 was John Leland who featured in the article “*Diverting the Ogmore*” [‘Archives’], and he noted then how “the sandes of the se sore hurtith the ground”.

An interesting theory has also been advanced that in the early centuries following the departure of the Romans a major road from Llantwit Major – one of the principal centres of early Christianity in Wales – ran this way via St Brides Major and Merthyr Mawr along the coast to Margam and on to West Wales and Ireland. Later, possibly under pressure from Viking raiding, it diverted inland through Ewenny and across the Ogmore at the future site of Bridgend. By the time of the Norman invasion circa 1093 the lower ford across the Ogmore nevertheless retained sufficient importance for it to be guarded by the castle of that name¹.

¹ Ogmore Castle today stands on the Ewenny River, but as related in “*Diverting the Ogmore*” (see ‘Archives’) this was as a result of a 16th century diversion.



So when Candleston Castle was built it would have overlooked a road of some local importance running along the foot of the slope on its southern side, and its 'fortifications' were, or so I believe, placed so as to impress passers-by. For all his ostentation however, the identity of the builder remains unknown. He seems nevertheless to be a very early and comparatively humble representative of the great 'castle builders' of Victorian Glamorgan such as the Iron Master (Richard Crawshay) with his great mansion at Cyfarthfa Castle, Merthyr or C.R.M. Talbot's with his 'castle' at Margam, where very effort was made firstly to create a spacious and comfortable mansion for the owner. Then, to give the superficial impression that this was a fortress from "days of old when knights were bold", a few tasteful and picturesque towers and battlement added here and there.