

A desperate, but ultimately successful feat of 16th century engineering that helped save the village of Merthyr Mawr.

Diverting the Ogmore River

In 1538 John Leland the Royal Antiquary to King Henry VIII arrived in Glamorgan on his journey round England and Wales to record all the significant features of his royal master's domain. As he journeyed through the county he paid a visit to the castle at Ogmore, which in his day was still in use, and left us a brief account of what he saw. In characteristically quirky spelling and grammar he recorded, "*Ogor Castelle standith on the Est Ripe of Ogor [river] on a playn ground a mile above the mouth of Ogor, and is eatly welle maintained. It longgid ons to Lounder [Londres], now to the King*".



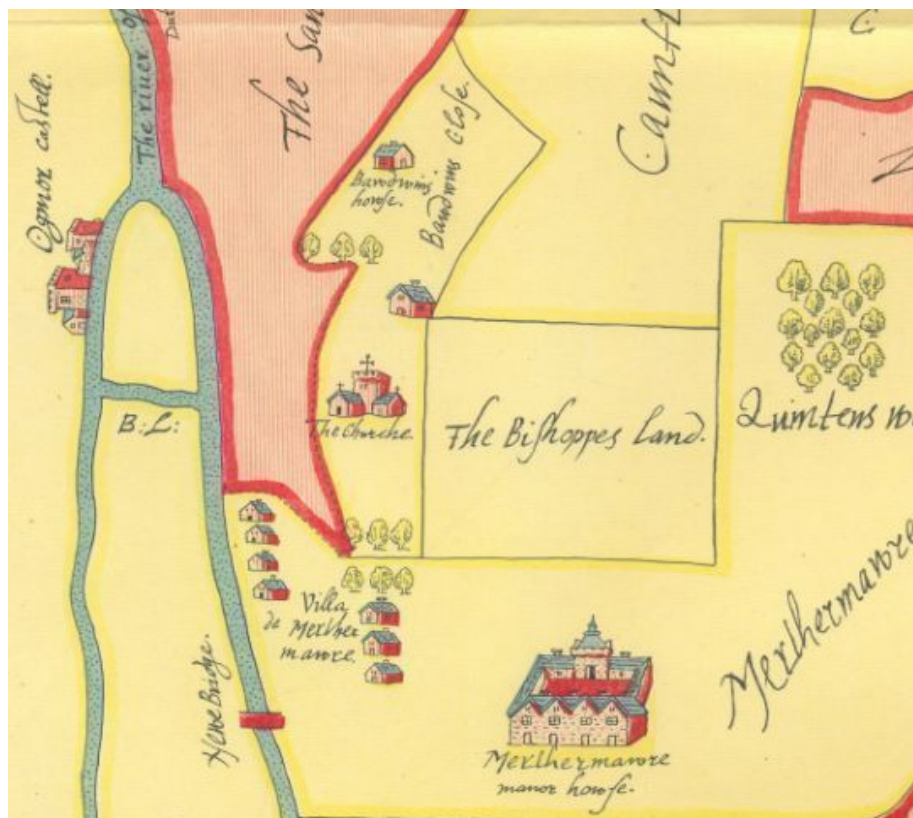
Down the years he has frequently been taken to task by local historians and others for this statement for (as is apparent to anyone who visits the castle today) the ruins stand on the east bank ('ripe') of the EWENNY River – and not the Ogmore as he claimed. The latter in fact flows further west close to the village of attractively thatched cottages at Merthyr Mawr, and joins the Ewenny a few hundred yards below the castle ruins. Yet the old antiquarian is quite adamant about the fact, asserting, a little further on in his account, "*Half a Mile above Ogor Castelle cummith Wenny Ryver into Ogor by the Est Ripe*".

Could he have got it so wrong? The castle is a favourite spot of mine that I never tire of visiting, and this is one of the little puzzles and questions it poses that I have pondered over in the past whilst enjoying the lovely vista from its crumbling walls. As I've discovered Leland *did* occasionally make minor errors, but one of such magnitude? Somehow I doubted it.

A few years ago the answer was supplied – and old Leland vindicated – when I purchased a second-hand book in a Cardiff arcade. Entitled "*The Storie of the Lower*

Borowes” the original was written in 1598 by a John Stradling, but this was a reprint published by the South Wales and Monmouth Record Society which as The South Wales Record Society is still in being today. The organisation is dedicated to publishing historical documents relating to the former counties of Monmouthshire and Glamorgan, and the “*Storie*” (to which are appended some other documents relating to Merthyr Mawr and Candleston) was its first such venture into the field.

Stradling’s book is certainly not one I would recommend for a relaxing bedtime read with a nice hot cup of cocoa! It relates at some length the details of a legal dispute between Sir Edward Stradling of St Donats, Lord of the Manor of Merthyr Mawr with a lawyer named Griffith Williams who was tenant of Candleston Castle. At stake was ownership of the land known today as Merthyr Mawr Warren – the “Lower Burrows” of the title. Obviously it gives an account of the dispute and subsequent legal wrangling from the Stradling point of view, and whilst the spelling and grammar are a considerable improvement on that of John Leland 60 years earlier, they are still heavy going!



Nevertheless for anyone keen to know more of the history of the area and willing to persevere, there is much in it of local interest, and the volume included a copy of a map drawn by John Stradling to illustrate the family’s case to be the rightful owners of the Burrows – coloured red on the portion included below. The map, or “platte” as he calls it, is not to scale, nor are some of the features illustrated shown in correct relationship to one another, but what caught my attention was the manner in which he had depicted the confluence of the Ewenny and Ogmore Rivers. The main streams flow as they do today, but upstream of Ogmore castle they are also connected by a short arm or branch alongside which is written “B L”.

What these initials may mean is unknown, and there is no trace of this former watercourse in the fields there today but it occurred to me that maybe John Leland had been right after all and what I was looking at was the former course of the Ogmore River he had described. The puzzle was then finally solved by a brief comment included by Stradling in his book, for sometime in the sixty years since 1538, the course of the Ogmore had indeed been altered.

Leland himself had walked through the Lower Boroughs en route from Bridgend to Newton (Porthcawl), and noted how, from about a mile inland from the coast “*the sandes of the Se sore hurith the ground*”. Already the dunes had buried the former village of Candleston, and whilst the castle on its hillock still survived, their onward advance was continuing towards the even larger settlement at Merthyr Mawr. The alarm of the inhabitants here was shared by that of the then Lord of the Manor, Sir Thomas Stradling who, as recorded in “*The Storie*” ordered drastic action.



This involved “*the cuttiinge and digging of a greate ditch upon parte of the borowes belowe the church of Merthermawre to the end to convey the river partly that way thereby to stop the sandes*”. It was a massive and presumably costly undertaking, but it seems to have worked, for of course the quaint little village of Merthyr Mawr and its church is still with us. John Stradling’s “platte” shows the situation as it was in his day with the main stream of the river diverted by his ancestor’s “greate ditch” along its present course, but with a short arm of the former course connecting with the Ewenny above Ogmore Castle still in being, though perhaps only holding water in times of flood.

Gradually the course of the latter silted up and vanished, so that now no trace remains. Old John Leland, however, has been vindicated and, as is so often the case, the solution to one mystery also offered the answer to another. The builders of Ogmore castle went to great lengths to excavate a wide and deep moat round the inner ward of Ogmore castle yet, even when the adjoining river floods it holds little more than a trickle of water, and under normal conditions it is dry. This seems rather odd

when, had they but dug down a few feet more, they would have created a permanent water barrier. Now, of course, we know that this was probably the case, for the river that flowed here in the castle's heyday was far larger and wider, carrying as it did the combined waters of both rivers.

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