

THE TURRET



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NEWSLETTER OF THE SNODHILL CASTLE PRESERVATION TRUST



“Snodhill is a key castle, in a key area, on a key route, on what was the most heavily defended border in Europe. In saving it, we’re saving a part of our national story” – Bill Klemperer, Principal Inspector, Historic England



Recovery and restoration

In May 2017, contractors began major restoration work on the castle, funded by a repair grant from Historic England. The work will secure the site, stabilise various significant veteran trees, and consolidate and preserve the remains of the keep, gatehouse, flanking walls north tower and south bastion. For updates on progress check snodhillcastle.org and our facebook pages. And read on:

Back from the brink

In October 2016, with emergency props in place to prevent imminent collapse, Snodhill Castle passed into the hands of its ninth owner, and the first solely committed to its preservation. The Snodhill Castle Preservation Trust took a 999-year lease on the site and will secure, preserve and explore the castle for the future. But it's taken years of patient perseverance to get to this point.

Since its apparent abandonment after the Civil War, the castle seems to have *demarched* from a high status manorial seat to little more than a ready source of good quality stone and bad quality grazing. Its remains appear to have been progressively dismantled and recycled into local houses, barns and walls: the back part of the turret arch was apparently nicked as late as the 1980s.

Its years of decline appear to be as poorly documented as its obvious years of pomp. In the Royal Commission of 1933, Snodhill Castle secured its listing as a scheduled ancient monument; but since then, little's been done either to arrest its deterioration or to understand its history.

In 1962 the castle was bought by a group of London businessmen who vested it as an asset of The Lords of Snodhill Ltd. The castle, and a fanciful 'lordship of the manor' (not now a legal title) appear to have been marketed at auction on at least one occasion, though apparently there were no takers. The years



The inner bailey, 2009



Mr Elwyne Morgan, a farmer, overlooking the Herefordshire countryside from the derelict fourteenth-century Snodhill Castle, near Hay-on-Wye, Powys. The ruins of the castle, which existed in Domesday Book times, accompany the title of The Lordship of Snodhill which is to be auctioned in London on November 11 (Photograph: Philio Dunn).

From the Daily Telegraph 1983



passed by with the castle a silently compliant host for Snodhill's seventies generation: a place loved by all - except, seemingly, its owners.

Starved of maintenance and with no land management, the site quickly became overgrown, and rooting systems of ash and ivy had free rein over the standing structures. The immense damage they can do over time is pictured above.

The castle signalled its distress with two dramatic wall collapses, in 1983 and 1997. Those signals were picked up by Garry Crook, an enthusiast who made it his mission to continually raise the castle's plight with English Heritage - with the result that Snodhill Castle was put on the very first

'Buildings at Risk' register in 1998, a kind of triage for preservation projects. Now, the castle's significance began to be recognised - just as the castle itself threatened to disappear altogether.

Places like these need champions and in 2009 Garry found Snodhill Castle two influential friends in Bill Klemperer (English Heritage Principal Inspector) and Neil Rimmington (Hereford Council Countryside Adviser Archaeology). These two individuals played a key role in the long and ultimately successful campaign to rescue the castle.



South wall of keep including window embrasure (now being reinstated), 2009

In 2010 Bill Klemperer proposed English Heritage buy the castle and restore it - just as government austerity policies rendered them unable to do so.

Time for plan (b). Sarah Lewis (HE Principal Heritage at Risk Adviser) searched for a suitable custodian to take on the project with the help of grant funding, and found one in the Vivat Trust, a charity dedicated to the rescue of ancient and unloved buildings.

An agreement was reached with the owners to hand over the castle on a 999-year lease. It was 2013.

English Heritage carried out the first full detailed survey of the fabric to record the remains in case of another collapse; an ecology survey was completed the same year and some clearance was undertaken. For a time the future looked secure.

Then disaster. In 2015 the Vivat Trust went into liquidation, taking funds earmarked for the castle with it. No rescue work had been done, and there was now a real risk that with no owner the lease would lapse and the castle would be back where it started: uncared for and at risk of collapse.

So Sarah hatched plan (c). If no suitable custodian could be found, maybe one should be created, ideally one with the castle its sole focus. Sarah approached Garry to examine the possibility of forming a trust with the local community as its key stakeholders.



In November 2016 Jesse Norman MP and Duncan Wilson CBE, Historic England CEO, visited the site to meet the Trust, prior to the issuing of a major repair grant.

In late 2015 he organised a meeting with the residents of Snodhill and invited them to join him in setting up a trust with the specific aim of rescuing the castle and restoring it to a place of beauty and mystery in the Golden Valley. The Snodhill Castle Preservation Trust was set up in Mark and Bridie Dixon's sitting room at The Green, Snodhill, in March 2016, registered with the Charity Commissioners in April, and the castle lease was conveyed to the Trust in October.



Propped south walls (August 2016)

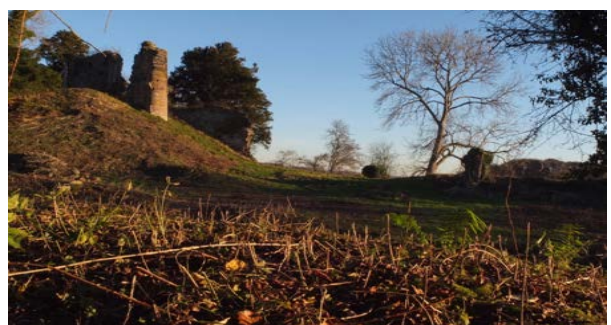
In April 2016 the Castle Studies Group (the UK's foremost body of experts and enthusiasts) visited the site and the fledgling trust had its first opportunity to promote its brighter future.

In summer 2016 oak props were put in place by Historic England to prevent the wholesale collapse of the Keep and South West curtain wall, and in October Garry invited nine castle experts along to date the remains and offer theories for its many puzzles.

Since then, work's gathered pace. Archaeological investigations of the South East Bastion have uncovered a previously unknown chamber, and have led to a reassessment of the dates of the castle's occupation. Various new features have been discovered in the Keep, not least of which is a well-preserved fireplace and the discovery that the Keep is not, as had been assumed, symmetrical. Now the major restoration work has commenced, funded by HE and conducted by Sally Strachey Historic Building Conservation. The work has been preceded by ecologist-supervised vegetation clearance from a team of billhook-wielding Trust volunteers (see next article).

Unknown to most, but treasured by many, Snodhill Castle is at last emerging from 400 years of neglect into the care of people who are passionate about it; its past - and its future. Join them.

Please visit snodhillcastle.org and register.



The inner bailey cleared, Autumn 2016

Meet the barrowers



The Snodhill Castle Preservation Trust site clearance volunteers

Through its multiple and puzzling layers of building, rebuilding, fortification and beautification; through centuries of conflict along this most contested of borders, it's still impossible not to imagine Snodhill Castle as having been (to borrow from Macbeth) a very pleasant seat indeed.

Its lozenge-shaped baileys oriented west-east command a turn in the Golden Valley, and from the keep on its motte - a steep sided cone that seems almost sculpted - the view greeting the chatelaine one rare sunny morning (maybe when the plague, the Welsh, or costive tenants were in abeyance) would have extended clockwise from the East across Peterchurch (with its then stone spire) to Garway Hill, round to the fields, mills, quarries and dwellings of Snodhill itself beneath the sunny south wall.



Master of all she surveys

Beyond, the deer park: extending up to the 430m ridge of Vagar Hill, with its lodges, lawns and dingles, down across West Lawn Common, Tyn Coed and the western valley slopes to the Bage, (the head of the valley) and back along the Eastern side from Merbach and Dorstone Hill over the likely ford crossing of Gattimer Lane to the Saxon village of Wilmastone and back to Peterchurch.

Master of all she surveyed, the castle would itself have been dramatically visible from most of the valley, and from both valley sides. The more so if the masonry was whited with limewash, as is commonly supposed.

And the setting sun would, as today, have flooded the turreted western entrance of the Keep, just as the sunrise would have warmed its eastern side.

Yet its command of the valley isn't one of architectural bombast. There's a delicacy about the castle that suggests a less austere fortified presence than that of say Longtown, or Clifford, and maybe a richer, higher status lifestyle.

The problem is, until last year it was nigh-impossible to see the castle at all.



Forty years of overgrowth and undergrowth have both obscured the castle from view and threatened its structure: from below with invasive tree roots, and from above with falling tree limbs. Ash tree roots took over the dismantling where the Civil War left off, with some of the trees likely dating back to that time.

What to do?

The Trust is working with Historic England to develop a long term management plan for the castle and its earthworks that balances the preservation of the fabric with its ecological environment, public safety and accessibility.

It's our intention to restore the motte and bailey to the clearly defined landmark in the Golden Valley that historically it must have been, attended by the various veteran yew, ash and oak trees that do not threaten the monument.

Meanwhile selective tree surgery has taken place to remove ash limbs that threatened to fall on the fabric, lighten the tree structures and minimise the risk of damage.

The undergrowth shrouding the curtain walls and keep is being progressively cleared, and the ground seeded with a mix of flower-rich grasses to create a sustainable woodland pasture suitable for grazing.



The Snodhill grass mix

Bracken is being removed and nettles and brambles suppressed, with the slope facing the gate conserved on behalf of its long-term tenants: ants and slow worms.

The clearance work has been entirely undertaken by a team of local volunteers who on Thursday mornings forgo their usual regime of yoga, pilates and wood-turning for breaking sweat with axe, maule and billhook: with a break for coffee and home-made cakes at 11.

Join us. Mail Nick Longman through the castle website snodhillcastle.org.

Sleuthing Snodhill

Snodhill Castle and its landscape setting are to get an aerial, archaeological and architectural investigation by Historic England

A castle; a deer park; an eye well; lodges and lawns; a possible pleasance; ruins. Remarkable things about Snodhill about which remarkably little is known.

In 2016 the Trust persuaded Historic England to fund a comprehensive investigation of the castle and its historic landscape by their Archaeological Survey and Investigation team, headed by Mark Bowden.



Mark Bowden and plane table

As far as we know this is the first significant investigation the castle and surroundings has ever received. One of its outputs will be a detailed topographic map of the castle site: the first such map ever produced. Once you have a map, you can establish where you are and where you want to go. In our



case, there's evidence the full extent of the castle site is larger than the current Scheduled Monument listing, and it may be that the scheduled (protected) area should be enlarged. And the map should help us identify future priorities for research and investigation in the years to come.

There are so many oddities and mysteries surrounding the origin, form and development of the castle and its setting as a remarkably preserved early Norman time capsule, the Trust will get advice and guidance from the team as to where to focus future investigations.



The mysterious Snodhill eyewell

The castle crew

Meet some of the folk who are investigating, restoring, preserving, clearing or just caring about the castle



Tim Kaye, founder of CLaN, community ecologist and volunteer
 – see <http://www.clan-cic.org/>

“I’ve a passion for ecology and a mission to communicate that passion, especially to the young. CLaN - Cultivating Learning and Nature, a Community Interest Company, carries that mission to take ecology into the community.



We do slightly strange but innovative events like Moth Breakfasts, where we examine the previous night’s collected moths over breakfast before releasing them. While others were getting excited about the newly uncovered stone remains, I made my own find: the false ladybird beetle *Endomychus coccineus*, which I found under some old blackthorn in April.”

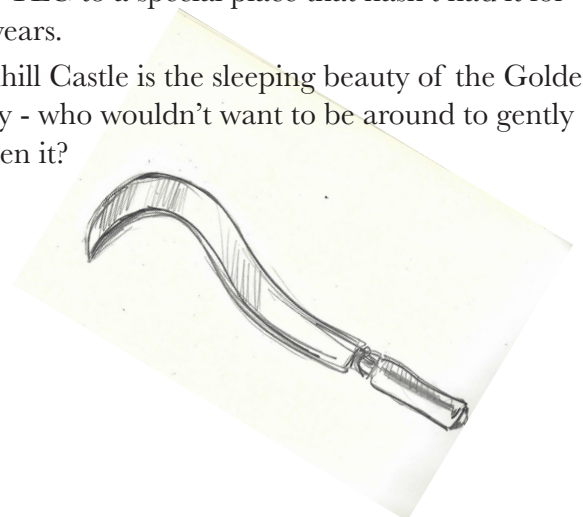


Nick Longman, chief volunteer and SCPT trustee

“Volunteering is good for the castle, for the community and it’s also quite good for body and soul.

There’s something about being with a bunch of people doing good stuff in the fresh air – especially with cake! And there’s a good feeling about giving some TLC to a special place that hasn’t had it for 400 years.

Snodhill Castle is the sleeping beauty of the Golden Valley - who wouldn’t want to be around to gently awaken it?





Jade Beresford, archaeologist, Snodhill resident, Trustee

“I was brought up in care, my parents were addicts, I was a rebel not surprisingly but had two fantastic teachers, and ended up with 4As and an A* at A-level. I always loved history but went to Leeds to do something more earnings-related: law. But what I wanted to do was archaeology. Because it’s about the origins of things: of trade, of agriculture, of religion, of technology, of civilisation. Problem: Leeds doesn’t do archaeology. So I headed for Manchester, studied under Julian Thomas, joined the dig at Dorstone Hill in 2013, and here I am, having done my Masters and now really digging (in every sense) working with Tim Hoverd at Hereford Archaeology.

The thing about archaeology is it throws up more questions than it answers. The SE Bastion has definitely been successively remodelled, and whatever the chamber we unearthed is, it was expensive. Was it built by the Crown? Snodhill Castle is a puzzle that will take years to solve, but it’s been great to be here unearthing those early steps in its discovery.”



Olly Fookes, Snodhill site manager and restoration craftsman, Sally Strachey Historic Conservation Ltd

“I’ve been restoring monuments for 15 years. Ruins are special, these are explorations, especially castles: unlike churches, which generally get altered according to a basic plan you can predict, over their hundreds of years castles get treated just like we treat houses today: they’re knocked through, have extensions bunged on, bits are altered and improved and bits get left to decay. I’ve found signs of repaired mortar at the top of the keep. Was this castle at some point preserved as a picturesque ruin?”

For updates on the restoration work, and to volunteer, be part of the discovery at www.snodhillcastle.org/





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