

The Story of Usk

a summary by Usk Civic Society

The Story of Usk: in the beginning

Following the Emperor Claudius's invasion in 43 AD, Roman armies fought against the Silures, a fierce Celtic tribe in South Wales, from 49 AD. They took another 30 years to overcome completely.

Usk (*Burrium*) was established by the Twentieth Legion in about 55 AD as the Romans advanced. It was the main fort in the area until after 65 AD, when the huge military settlement at Caerleon (*Isca Silurum*) was begun. The eastern part of the fort's main street (*Via Principalis*) can still be seen as a footpath between Usk Prison and the Sessions House, leading into Pook Lane and the fields behind.

After the move to Caerleon, the north-western corner of the previous fort stayed in use as an auxiliary fort until around 120 AD.

The Story of Usk: 1066 and all that

After the Romans left Britain around 410 AD, successive waves of invaders occupied most of what is now England – first the Anglo-Saxons, then various Scandinavians in the north-eastern half of the country. Wales remained (relatively) undisturbed and Offa's Dyke seems evidence of an agreed border between England and Wales.

After 1066, however, the Normans gained rapid control of England and moved swiftly into Wales. Castles were built at strongpoints to dominate the surrounding areas.

The first Norman castle in Usk was probably built between 1071 and 1075 – a simple wooden structure on a *Motte* (Mound) with a *Bailey* (palisaded enclosure).

Later, 1160-80, a stone gatehouse/keep was built, nearer the present town.

The Story of Usk: Norman market town

1154: the accession of Henry II ended 20 years of anarchy (“when God and His angels slept”).

Richard (“Strongbow”) de Clare, the local Marcher Lord, founded the market town (*burgh*) of Usk. The undercroft of the first market hall still survives as the cellar of Mulberry House opposite Twyn Square.

“Burgage” plots were rented out in in the town – the further from the market centre, the larger the plot available for one shilling’s rent.

De Clare granted a charter for a Priory of Benedictine nuns in Usk. The Priory Church was larger than the present St Mary’s: the sides of the church tower today show where the chancel and north transept of the original church building were attached.

The Story of Usk: Revolting Barons

1215: King John signed Magna Carta after the Barons’ Revolt. The Curtain Wall and Inner Ward were added to the Castle by William Marshal.

1314: Edward II was defeated by the Scots at Bannockburn and the lord of Usk, Gilbert de Clare, was killed. A hall was built at Usk Castle by Gilbert or his heirs, 1314-18.

In the early 1320s, the Barons were again in revolt – this time against Edward II and his Despenser favourites. The heiress of Usk, Elizabeth de Burgh, had been forced to swap Usk Castle with the Despensers for Gower. She returned by 1326 after their fall (and apparently celebrated with a lavish banquet).

Around this time, a new Gatehouse was built at the Castle. This still forms the front entrance of Castle House.

The Story of Usk: Glyndwr's revolt

1402: Henry IV overthrew Richard II, but faced revolts from Owain Glyndŵr (who almost succeeded in unifying Wales as a separate kingdom), the Mortimers, and the Percys in Northumberland.

Usk Castle was sacked by Glyndŵr and the town itself burned. Parts of the present Rural Life Museum may predate the burning.

1405: Battle of Pwll Melin: the Welsh (under Glyndŵr's son Gruffydd) were defeated just outside Usk with heavy losses. 300 prisoners were executed near the Castle. Glyndŵr's fortunes waned thereafter.

There was extensive rebuilding in Usk after the burning. The Nook and The Old Malsters near the Museum can be dated back to this period.

1430: Death of Adam of Usk, lawyer, cleric and contemporary of Glyndŵr, who chronicled the revolt (and much else). He is buried in St Mary's Church.

The story of Usk: the Tudors

The Wars of the Roses ended in 1485 when Henry Tudor, the Lancastrian claimant to the throne, gained massive Welsh support and defeated Richard III at Bosworth. He became Henry VII.

1536: Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII. In Usk, the Priory was dissolved and the last Prioress, Eleanor Williams, was granted a pension of £9 a year (the other nuns had nothing).

Usk Priory Gatehouse (probably built shortly before the Dissolution) is a rare surviving example of a monastic gatehouse.

Henry VIII's church reforms were briefly reversed under the Catholic Mary Tudor, but her sister Elizabeth re-established the reformed religion.

She was excommunicated by the Pope and Catholics in turn suffered financial and legal penalties. It was high treason to be a Catholic priest.

The Story of Usk: Walter Jones' exploits

The late 16th and early 17th centuries saw many religious wars in Europe. France was a particular hotbed, with the Catholic monarchy persecuting the Protestant Huguenots.

St Mary's Church, Usk contains a monument to Watter* (*Walter*) Jones. His date of birth is not given, but he clearly had a long life - enough to have trained as a pikeman during Elizabeth's reign and then fought under Charles I during one of the campaigns in the Île de Ré – possibly when the Duke of Buckingham went to relieve the siege of the Protestant garrison at La Rochelle in 1627.

**("Watter" or "Water" seems to have been the way that "Walter" was pronounced at the time. Shakespeare's plays have several puns on the name.)*

The Story of Usk: the Popish Plot

1678: The "Popish Plot" reflected a genuine concern that Charles II's brother James, a Catholic, could not be trusted with the throne. (In fact he was ousted in 1688 after reigning only 3 years)

Informers betrayed the presence of Catholic priests all over the country. It remained high treason to be a Catholic priest, although it seems that many had been tolerated if they kept their heads down.

In Usk, August 1679 saw the trial and execution of the Jesuit Fr David Lewis, who had been in the country since 1648 and quietly running a Jesuit College at Llanrothal for years.

He was sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered (the standard penalty for high treason) but it is reported that the people of Usk would not allow him to be cut down for mutilation while still alive. He was buried outside St Mary's Church, though not exactly where the modern memorial slab is. He was canonised in October 1970.

The Story of Usk: the Toll Roads

1750s: a movement all over the country to improve the (awful) roads.

Valentine Morris (of Piercefield in Chepstow) promoted various Acts of Parliament for building or improving Monmouthshire roads.

Usk was one of 7 turnpike areas in the county. Improved roads were built by Turnpike Trusts and paid for by tolls levied on users (just like the Severn Bridge toll today, they were widely disliked).

The Monmouth Road was one of the new turnpike roads. Tŷ Basket is one of several surviving toll houses in Usk.

The Story of Usk: the Romantic poets

1822: Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned in Italy. His cremation and burial were organised by Edward Trelawny, a political radical and friend of Lord Byron.

After a chequered career which included (or so he claimed) a spell as a pirate, involvement with Byron in the Greek war of independence, and travelling extensively in the USA, Trelawny lived for 20 years in and around Usk, in what are now the Royal Hotel, Twyn Bell and Cefn Ila.

His “advanced” views on things like women’s rights (not to mention his multiple relationships and bohemian lifestyle, including nude bathing in the Usk) scandalised many local people.

The Story of Usk: the Chartist Riots

1832: the Reform Act tried to reflect demographic changes by abolishing many “rotten boroughs” and extending the franchise, but Monmouthshire’s parliamentary seats remained unchanged despite its huge growth in population.

John Frost, a Newport businessman, was active in the cause of reform. In 1836 he was elected Mayor of Newport and soon became a leading activist in the People's Charter movement, which campaigned for universal (male) suffrage.

1840: following the Chartist Riots in Newport, Frost and other alleged ringleaders were tried in Monmouth. Less important participants went on trial in the upper rooms of Usk Town Hall (now the Royal British Legion Club).

Usk Prison was built shortly afterwards in 1842 and the rifle-slits in the old gatehouse were not for decoration – they reflect a genuine fear of violent revolution.

The Story of Usk: the Secret Army

1940: with the prospect of a German invasion, Usk, like other places in Monmouthshire, had a (highly secret) Auxiliary Unit. This Unit was made up of specially trained local men whose task was to sabotage and cause mayhem and disruption behind enemy lines.

Each Unit had a concealed Operational Base (OB) to hide in and from which to carry out their raids “if the balloon went up”. Usk's OB has been lovingly restored by Henry Humphreys, owner of Usk Castle.

Each of the Monmouthshire Units had a biblical name. Usk's was “Esau”.

The Auxiliars' existence was not made known until years after the war ended. Many of the original members died before their roles were officially recognised.

(The only war casualty in Usk was a horse, killed by a stray German bomb at Dairy Barn, Chepstow Road.)