A Brief History of Bishop’s Castle

The history of Bishop’s Castle begins in the eighth century when Offa, the powerful King of Mercia, who built the Dyke to defend his Kingdom, murdered Ethelburt, the young King of East Anglia. This was a terrible and treacherous act on the part of a Christian King respected, until this point, for his faith, wisdom and judgement. There are several accounts of the affair, but they all contain the same features. The head was separated from the body and the remains tossed into marshy ground by the river Lugg. From here they were later removed by Offa’s Chamberlain and taken to a place called Fernley, which later became Hereford. Here the remains were properly buried, the tomb becoming a sanctuary and a place of miracles.

At some point after the murder of Ethelburt in 792, Egwin, known as Shakehead because of his affliction, having being cured of his trembling palsy at Ethelburt’s sanctuary in Hereford Cathedral, gave the whole of his manor at Lydbury to the Bishops of Hereford. It was a very generous gift. Egwin Shakehead’s estate consisted of 18,000 acres and its income would have been substantial.

The manor extended from the Saxon settlement at Lydbury to the borders of Wales and it included the land on which the future, Norman Bishops of Hereford would build a castle and town. The Lydbury manor was situated in a troubled area, vulnerable to attack from the Welsh. After the Norman Conquest in 1066, the Bishops of Hereford were appointed Marcher Lords responsible for the defence of the Marches or frontiers between Wales and England. Much of the Welsh Marches frontier was secured by Roger Montgomery and his brood of fighting sons. As they thrust their way into Wales, they were keen to secure the borders behind them. A series of motte and bailey castles were built and it seems likely that the first castle built in the vicinity of the present town was among them. In the Domesday survey of 1086, no castle for the manor of Lydbury is mentioned but like many other minor motte and bailey castles, it may not have been listed. The Lay Subsidy Rolls for this period, however, do show that a castle connected with the manor of Lydbury was under the charge of the Bishop’s of Hereford in 1087/88.

This castle would have been of the motte and bailey type, and it was built on the hill at the top of the present town. The castle was sited to guard the nascent town and its church. From this vantage point, the Bishop’s castle could guard not only the group of dwellings that began to huddle beneath it, but also the "new" town that began to edge its way down the hill towards the church. By 1127, a "plantation" town seems to have been established on this line down the hill from the castle to the church on exactly the same line followed by High Street and Church Street today.

To secure settlement and foster trade on the troubled border lands, the Normans created a series of these new, "plantation" towns, some more successful and enduring than others. They were protected by castles, sometimes by walls, but the most important incentive given to settlement was land. The towns were laid out in burgage plots along the main street or highway and the settlers brave enough to take up residence were granted the privilege of being burgesses and free men with rights to both their land and houses. This was no small incentive at a time when everyone not lucky enough to be born into the privileged' nobleman class was the property of the nearest Lord of the Manor.

The small Norman town seems to have thrived despite anarchy and war and in 1167 a stone castle is built to replace the old motte and bailey fortification. The town is locally known as Y Trefesgob, "Town of the Bishops" and is regularly visited by the Bishops of Hereford when court sessions are held and fines and taxes, a lucrative source of income in medieval times, are collected. In 1226, it is also visited by the young Henry III when he tours the Welsh Borderlands. The town's growing financial importance, and the main reason for its thriving survival, is trade. In 1249 a Royal Charter is granted by King John, allowing a weekly market to be held plus an annual fair in June. This market is
still held every Friday but, sadly, the May Fair as it came to be known, is no longer the highlight of each year.

By the late thirteenth century, the town is actually named as Bishop’s Castle in official documents. In 1281, after yet another period of strife and anarchy, the castle has been completely refurbished, so completely, in fact, that it is called “new” and gives its name to the town.

Around 1570, Bishop’s Castle and its surrounding lands became, briefly, Crown Property. Elizabeth I sold the town and the holdings round it to the Walcots of Walcot and in 1573 granted a new Royal Charter which established the positions of Bailiff, Recorder and fifteen Aldermen. This Council was self-perpetuating and for the first time in the town's history had the powers of self government and so the town was free from oversight by Bishops or church. The new Borough had its own prison, under the Town Hall and the right to elect two Members of Parliament.

Bishop’s Castle played little part in the Civil War (1645-1648) but probably had Royalist sympathies since William Walcot was an avowed Loyalist and was a page at the execution of Charles I. The castle by this time seems to have been a derelict ruin, stripped of roof lead and with much of its stone and timber recycled into the building of several new and in some cases quite splendid town houses near the site. It seems to have been of no value or significance to either side. The town did, however, set up a roster of armed burgesses, nicknamed Clubmen, to defend any property under attack and records show that around a thousand men in the Clun and Bishop's Castle area carried arms, “standing out against both sides, neither for the King nor Parliament, but only for the preservation of their own lives and fortunes”.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Bishop’s Castle became one of England’s notorious "Rotten Boroughs". Votes of "free" men, the burgesses of the town, were bought to ensure the election of candidates supported by the land-owning classes. Such bribery ruined the Walcots. In 1763, their estates were bought were bought by the wealthy Clive of India and from then on, the Clive family controlled the constituency of Bishops Castle and its elections until the Reform Act of 1832 which deprived 56 Rotten Boroughs, including this town, of both their Members of Parliament.

The little town, however, continued to thrive with its weekly markets when livestock was traded in the streets. This practice went on until the First World War when the council bought the paddock at the rear of the Kings Head for an auction yard. And at the May Fair, the farm hands would crowd into the town to sell their labour for the coming year, sealing the bargain with a silver shilling. The town’s several public houses were filled to overflowing and the Boars Head was famous for its bare fist fights which took place on the corner of the Horse Fair, now Station Street.

Which brings the town's story to 1865 and the establishment of the Bishop’s Castle Railway, the line that went nowhere, endured against all odds for seventy years and was in the Receivers hands for sixty nine of them. The railway ran from Bishop’s Castle to Craven Arms, along the valley of the river Onny and through some of the most beautiful countryside in South West Shropshire. It brought cattle to the markets, goods to the shops, coke to the gas works and was thoroughly enjoyed by every member of the community. But it never made any money for its shareholders. It struggled on until 1935, when it finally closed, rolling stock, rails and sleepers being sold off to pay some of the accumulated debts.

Bishop’s Castle is no longer a borough, no longer has a castle or a railway, But it still has a Mayor and Town Council who are proceeded on special occasions by two splendid Tudor silver maces. It still has several public houses, two of which brew their own beer. And it has an architectural heritage
through which the discerning eye can trace the details of the town's history from Norman times to the present day.

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