

CASTELL DINAS BRÂN, NEAR LLANGOLLEN, DENBIGHSHIRE.

By WALTER H. TREGELLAS.

It may appear strange that so remarkable and picturesque a ruined fortress as Castell Dinas Brân should hitherto have had no monograph devoted to its description. The exact date of the fabric seems to be a matter of uncertainty; the only existing portion of the building which might give a clue to the precise time of its construction having been attributed to a period somewhat subsequent to such particulars of the history of the castle as are extant. I wish therefore, in the following remarks, rather to collect such notices as I have been able to find, than to frame any hypothesis regarding the origin of this striking stronghold, or the period to which it should be assigned.

The castle is situated on an artificial plateau on the top of a conoid hill which rises about 1,000 feet above the river Dee.<sup>1</sup> Its position is familiar, no doubt, to most persons who have visited North Wales. The hill rises so suddenly, and it is so completely detached from the surrounding heights, that it frowns savagely down upon the quiet glens of the neighbourhood, and seems to overawe the valley of Llangollen. An earlier structure is said to have been destroyed by fire in the tenth century.<sup>2</sup>

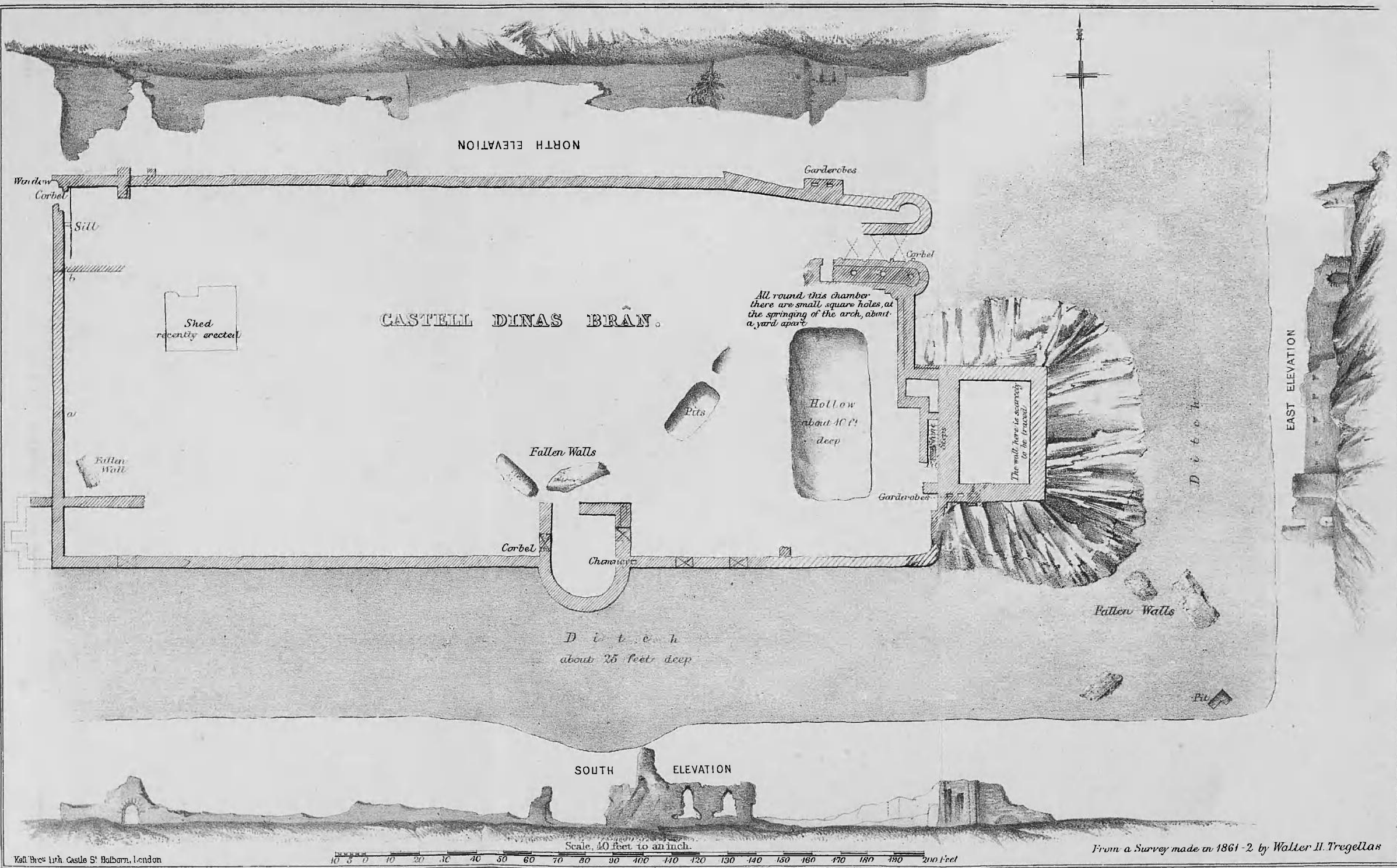
The place, in its almost inaccessible seclusion, afforded a secure refuge from the infuriated Welsh, when Gryffydd ap Madoc Maelor—his sympathies weaned from his native Wales by his English wife—took part with Henry III. and Edward I. in their endeavors to subjugate his countrymen.

There is a tradition that the present building sustained a

<sup>1</sup> Leland thus describes its situation;—  
“Dinas Brane Castel on a rocky hille  
standith almost as neere as Valis Crucis  
to Dee Ripe, and going up on De Water  
is somewhat lower than the Abbay:—  
Llan Gotlan village is on the south side  
[of Dee River] and Dinas Brane Castelle

standith upon an high hille on the North  
Ripe of Dee, a 3 quarters of a mile of.”  
Leland's Itin. vol. v. ff. 35, 53.

<sup>2</sup> Caradoc of Llancarfan, 601, f. 6,  
Brit. Mus. Topographical Notices by  
Rd. Llwyd, 1832, p. 64.



NORTH ELEVATION

CASTELL DINAS BRÂN.

EAST ELEVATION

SOUTH ELEVATION

Scale, 40 feet to an inch.

From a Survey made in 1861-2 by Walter H. Tregellas

Warden  
Corbel

Garderobes

Corbel

Shed  
recently erected

All round this chamber  
there are small square holes, at  
the springing of the arch, about  
a yard apart

The wall here is scarcely  
to be traced

Fallen  
Wall

Pits

Hollow  
about 10 ft  
deep

Fallen Walls

Corbel

Chamber

Garderobes

D i t c h  
about 25 feet deep

Fallen Walls

Pit

siege at the commencement of the fifteenth century by Owen Glyndwr, when held by Thomas Fitzalan, Earl of Arundel, a strenuous supporter of the House of Lancaster.<sup>3</sup>

Dinas, signifies, beyond all doubt, a fortified place;<sup>4</sup> but as regards the signification of Brân there seems to be great difference of opinion. Some have supposed that it was derived from a corruption of the name of Brennus, king of the Gauls, the brother of Belinus, as conflicts are said to have taken place between the brothers in this neighbourhood; whilst others conjecture that the name was taken from Bryn, a mountain, or from Bran, the mountain stream which runs at the foot of its northern slope. The only author of reputation who advocates the former derivation appears to be Humphrey Llwyd, "an antiquary of good repute," who, in 1568, in his "*Britanniæ descriptionis commentariolum*," referring to the history of Brennus, thus makes mention of the place,—"*castellum Dinas Brân, id est palatium Brenni vocatum*"; and again,—"*illud castellum quod palatium Brenni in hunc diem vocatur.*"<sup>5</sup>

Pennant is amongst those who advocate the latter etymology, namely, that Dinas Brân takes its name from the mountain stream;<sup>6</sup> there is a stream on the northern side, taking its rise amongst the Eglwysegle cliffs, subject to "spates" or sudden swellings after rain, which I believe

<sup>3</sup> Owen Glyndwr had more than one stronghold in proximity to Dinas Brân, and claimed as his territory the Glyn Dyfrdwy, or Valley of the Dee, now the Vale of Llangollen. Pennant, who visited the site of his chief residence, gives the description of its ancient magnificence as sung by Iolo Goch, Owen's favorite bard. *Tour in Wales*, vol. i. p. 305. Leland remarks that "Owen Glindour had a place in Yale, upon the north side of De, caullid Ragarth, v. mile above Dinas Brane," and notices vestiges of a castle of Glyndwr's midway between Valle Crucis and Ruthin, called "Keven De, i. e., the bakke of the Blake Hille, where now shepardes kepe shepe." *Itin.* vol. v. f. 35.

<sup>4</sup> See Richards' Dictionary, v. Din, and Tin, the same as Dinas, a city. Its primary sense, as Edward Lhwyd observes, in his *Archæologia Brit.*, seems to be a fortified hill, as shown by Dinbren, *al.* Tinbren, the township where Castell Dinas Brân is situated, and by other names of places cited *ibid.* Camden

states that the common people believed Dinas Brân "to have been built by Brennus, the Gaulish general, and called after him; others explain it, the castle of the royal palace; for *Brenn*, in British, signifies a king; whence, perhaps, that most potent king of the Gauls and Britons was called Brennus, by way of eminence. But others, I think with greater probability, derive its name from its high situation on a high hill, which the Britons call *Bryn*." Camden's *Britannia*, under Denbighshire.

<sup>5</sup> Humf. Llwyd, *Brit. Descr.*, pp. 68, 91. It may not be out of place to remark here, that a fine monument of Humphrey Llwyd (or Lloid), may be seen at Whitchurch, near Denbigh, in the north aisle, near the altar; the inscription, when I saw it some time ago, was half hidden by the back of a pew, and nearly obliterated with plaster.

<sup>6</sup> *Tour in Wales*, vol. i. p. 280, where a general view of the castle and adjacent country is given.

the word Bran implies, but I have been unable to find, either from the Ordnance survey or from inquiries in the neighbourhood, whether its name is or ever has been Bran. It should also be noticed that Bran in Welsh means a crow;<sup>7</sup> and the castle is called "Crow Castle" by the inhabitants of Llangollen, where there is an inn with that sign.<sup>8</sup>

Close under the hill lies a smaller eminence, called Dinbren, on which are still to be seen traces of what appears to have been an ancient encampment; and possibly the syllable "bren" may have been derived from the same root as Brân. Watson, in his history of the Earls of Warren, says distinctly that Dinas Bran "gives its name to the township of Dinbren in which it stands."<sup>9</sup> In the west of England some isolated hills,<sup>1</sup> such as this, have Bren or Brent prefixed to their names, and there may perhaps be some common origin for the two words.

The general arrangement of the structure will be understood by the accompanying plan and elevations. No elevation is here given of the western side because the ruins are, on that side, nearly level with the surface. The dotted lines at the south west angle are taken from a small-scale survey in the War Office, made by a candidate for a cadetship in the corps of Royal Engineers, in 1831, to which I have been enabled to refer by the kind permission of Sir John Burgoyne. If researches by excavation are ever made at this castle, it would be desirable to ascertain whether any remains can be found to correspond with the plan at this point.

The walls have been built chiefly from the *deblai* of the

<sup>7</sup> "Brân, a crow; Brauos, young crows," &c. Richards' Welsh Dictionary. Pennant rejects the supposition that the castle hence took its name. Edward Lhuyd, in his *Adversaria*, appended to Baxter's *Glossarium Antiquæ Britannicæ*, p. 267, gives "*Bran*, a crow, probably from its swiftness. There is a brook of this name by Lhan-Gollen, in Denbighshire, whence the name of Dinas Bran, and not, as Humphrey Lhuyd and Camden suppose, from the Gaulish general, Brennus."

<sup>8</sup> "Dinas Brân is vulgarly called *Crow Castle*, from *Bran*, a crow, but more probably derived by E. Lhuyd, from the brook *Bran*, which is crossed by a bridge near Llangollen." *Additions to Camden's Brit.*, edit. Gough, vol. iii. p. 218.

<sup>9</sup> Watson's *Memoirs of the Earls of Warren*, vol. i. p. 266, where a view of the castle is given, showing its position and the approach to the plateau on which it stands. This engraving is not a very trustworthy representation.

<sup>1</sup> Such as Brent Tor, near Tavistock, and Brent Knoll, near Axbridge, where there are traces of a Roman camp. Again, about a mile west of Sancreed church, at the Land's End, are traces of an ancient hill-fort called *Caer Brân*. And whilst casting about for the etymology of the word, it has occurred to me that Bran is the reputed name of the father of Caractacus, and king of the Cymry. Bran may have been the name of some early occupant of the stronghold.

noble fosse on the south and east sides of the castle ; they are composed of rather small slaty stones, imbedded in a good mortar, which has been freely used. In many places, the wall of the enceinte can scarcely now be traced ; and it is only at those parts which appear to have been the principal entrance and the keep, that any considerable mass of masonry is now standing. In no part does any upper room remain, and indeed the only portion of the ruins which is not open to the sky is a chamber with three small circular holes in its vaulted roof, near the principal entrance, and which has proved an enigma to all recent inquirers.<sup>2</sup> The castle was in ruins in Leland's time ; and the fragments that remain are falling rapidly into decay. Unless the southern wall is underpinned without delay, it is not improbable that the destruction of the southern front—by far the most striking and important part which exists—must speedily occur.<sup>3</sup> From the absence of all foliage on so bleak an eminence, the scene is not invested with the picturesque air which so frequently surrounds a castle in ruins ; but two or three ferns, which I believe are rather uncommon, grow on the walls, and the view from the castle amply repays the visitor for the ascent of the hill.

In some places are to be found mutilated free-stone voussoirs, bases of shafts, groins, sills, and corbels, apparently of the stone of the neighbourhood obtained at Cefn.

The principal approach was from the south-east, through Llandin farm, just below which a bridge once crossed the Dee on the road of communication between Castell Dinas Brán and Castell Crogen (Chirk Castle). This road doubtless formed a connecting link in the great chain of border-fortresses in the Welsh marches.

On the north and west sides there is no ditch ; on the north the hill is almost precipitous, and on the western side, it is only after two or three rests in a scramble of about a quarter of a mile, that the summit is reached. Even the ardour of a lover-bard, Howel ap Einion Lygliw, could not pass unnoticed the steepness of the hill ; for, writing a long poem to the celebrated beauty, Myfanwy Vechan, a

<sup>2</sup> The entrance to the Château de Coucy, described and figured in M. Viollet Le Duc's *Dictionnaire de l'Architecture Française*, p. 168, is more like it

than any other that I have examined.

<sup>3</sup> The southern front still stands, July, 1864.

descendant of the House of Tudor Trevor, and whose father probably held the castle under the Earls of Arundel, in 1390, he says,—

“ Though hard the steep ascent to gain,  
Thy smiles were harder to obtain.”

It has been stated that the lovely Myfanwy's tomb is to be seen at Valle Crucis Abbey ; but this appears to have been the resting-place of another Myfanwy, the wife of Yeaf ap Adam of Trefor.

In the Beauties of England and Wales,<sup>4</sup> the Rev. J. Evans has stated that there were two wells and a chapel in the castle. Mr. Llwyd, in his Topographical Notes to Caradoc of Llancarfan, and Mr. Wyndham,<sup>5</sup> repeat this statement as to the wells, but I have been unable to find any traces of them. Both Mr. Llwyd and Mr. Wyndham mention that there were drawbridges over the fosse, and the former states that there were two drawbridges.

Where Tower Farm now stands, about a mile distant to the west, there existed formerly, it is said, a tower, which was a sort of advanced post of the castle ; and there is the common rumour of a subterranean passage having existed between the two places.

What can be further said of the history of this interesting old fortress ? The date of its abandonment is unknown ; and in the days of Henry VIII. Leland could only say—“ The castelle of Dinas Brane was never bygge thing, but sette al for strenght as in a place half inaccessible for enemyes. It is now al in ruine, and there bredith every yere an egle. And the egle doth sorely assaut hym that distroith the nest, goyng down in one basket, and having a nother over his hedde to defend the sore stripe of the egle.”<sup>6</sup>

Conjecture, however, is busy on the subject. Mr. King observes, in his *Munimenta Antiqua*, that, “ It is known that it existed as a castle in British times ; ”<sup>7</sup> but he gives no authority for this statement. Nor is it anything more than an opinion on Pennant's part, when he says that a primitive

<sup>4</sup> North Wales, vol. xvii. p. 559.

<sup>5</sup> Wyndham's Tours through Wales in 1774 and 1777.

<sup>6</sup> Itinerary, vol. v. pp. 35, 53, edition, 1745.

<sup>7</sup> Vol. iii. p. 125.

Welsh castle formerly occupied the position.<sup>8</sup> He is further of opinion that Eliseg, prince of Powys, whose pillar still stands on a mound in one of the meadows near Valle Crucis Abbey, lived here; and remarks that the letters on that pillar resemble those in use in the sixth century.<sup>9</sup>

From the absence of any evidence of a later time, and notwithstanding the date which has been given to one of the voussoirs at the north-east entrance, it appears probable that the castle was built in the days of Henry III., by one of the Welsh lords of Bromfield<sup>1</sup> and Yale; possibly by the Gryffydd ap Madoc Maelor, to whom reference has already been made, and who was buried at Valle Crucis Abbey, in 1270. He was the only son of Madoc ap Gryffydd Maelor, who founded the abbey in 1200, and the great grandson of Owen Gwynedd, Prince of North Wales about 1137. The Maelors seem to have been a powerful family.<sup>2</sup> They were lords of Bromfield and Yale, of which Castell Dinas Brân formed part, and also of the territory of Tref y Waun, in which Chirk Castle, formerly called Castell Crogen, now stands.

Gryffydd retired to Dinas Brân to seclude himself from his infuriated fellow-countrymen, when, after his marriage with an English woman, Emma, daughter of James, Lord Audley, he transferred his sword as well as his heart to the foreigner. But what the Welsh in those days considered no doubt a righteous judgment fell upon him. After his death the guardianship of his young sons was conferred by Edward I. on two of his favorites; John, seventh Earl of Warren, received under his tutelage Madoc, and Roger Mortimer, son of Roger, Baron of Wigmore, was appointed guardian of Llewelyn.<sup>3</sup> It is stated that the two children were soon afterwards drowned under Holt Bridge, which is seventeen or eighteen miles distant. This is said to have happened in 1281. John, Earl Warren, obtained the fortress of Dinas Brân, with the lordship of Bromfield and Yale; his grant bears date 7th October, 10 Edward I. (1282),<sup>4</sup> whilst Mortimer made himself master of Tref y Waun.

<sup>8</sup> Pennant, *Tour in Wales*, vol. i. p. 280.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>1</sup> Maylor (Maelor) is Bromfield in English, according to Leland.

<sup>2</sup> *Rotuli Walliæ*, 81, Memb. 3.

<sup>3</sup> See Powell's *Hist. of Wales*, p. 194;

cited in Dugdale's *Bar.* vol. i. p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> *Rot. Wall. ann.* 10 Edw. I. "Concessio castri de Dynasbran et totius terre de Bromfeld confirmata Johanni de Warena comiti Surreie. Apud Rothelan, 7 Oct."

According, however, to a statement in Watson's Memoirs of the Earls of Warren, it is uncertain whether the king himself did not cause the children to be put to death.<sup>5</sup> From the Warrens, Castell Dinas Brân passed by marriage to the Fitzalans; it now belongs to Colonel Biddulph, of Chirk Castle. Gryffydd's youngest son appears to have escaped his brothers' fate; and John Earl Warren obtained from Edward I. a grant, dated 12th February, 1282, of the tract of Glyndwrwy (terra de Glyndeoerdo), for Gryffydd Vechan.<sup>6</sup>

This is all that I have been able to gather on the subject. I should feel gratified if my enquiries might lead to more careful research into the history of this ruined fortress, and especially if these remarks should lead to the rescue of the remaining fragments from the destruction which now seems imminent.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Vol. i. p. 268; the learned author observes that historians leave us too much in the dark to allow of any decision in regard to the alienation of the estates of Madoc, "Caradoc of Llancarvan expressly charging the whole transaction to the king's account." As that historian however, is supposed to have died in 1157, the statement in question may

have been derived from some later chronicler by whom his history was continued. See Williams's Biog. Dict., under Caradawg.

<sup>6</sup> Rot. Wall. ann. 11 Edw. I.

<sup>7</sup> Views of Castell Dinas Brân may be found in Henry Gastineau's Views of Antiquities in Wales, and in some other topographical works.