

# Invisible Fortress

## The Vanishing of Shipbrook Castle



The castle at Shipbrook near Davenham is long lost to us today, its last traces being cleared from the land in the 1790s. However, in balancing the brutal events of early Norman England together with the history of a key local family, not only can we better appreciate this often over looked corner of medieval Cheshire, but perhaps for the first time, look to understand the story of Shipbrook Castle and its ties to a bloody revolt against King Henry IV.

## A New Technology

For many of us, few things better represent the distinct charm and lure of English history than the image of the Norman castle. Imposing in construction and romantic in ruin, the castle offers a tangible connection to both the history and accompanying fantasy of the medieval world. In reality though, our castles are far more than mere agents of the period in which they were built. They are often places with a defensive legacy stretching back into pre-history; and their ruinous state is commonly found to be the result of their connections to the English Civil Wars of the seventeenth century. Throughout Cheshire, we are blessed with a startling array of strongholds to visit and study. This is primarily due to the county being one of the original administrative centres of England established by the Norman regime following their victory at Hastings in 1066.

In the years following the conquest, Cheshire would be cast as a frontier region buffering Norman England from the warring, neighbouring kingdoms of Wales. It's no fluke that of the twenty castle sites located throughout the county, nine are found within just a few miles of the Welsh border; their construction forming a deliberate chain of military resource stretching for some thirty miles along the River Dee. The vast majority of castles in England owe their design and function to a continental idea introduced by the incoming Norman nobility of the eleventh century. Built in large numbers across the Anglo-Scandinavian landscape to provide immediate protection

from, or perhaps more importantly the subjugation of, rebellious local populations, the castle was key to enabling the establishment of Norman governance in each surrounding region.

Far from the classic image of the castle we have today, these early constructions were primarily formed of an earthen mound (*Motte*) and protected courtyard (*Bailey*), all of which was then surrounded by a protective ditch and palisade stake wall. They were cheap to construct and quick to build. The perfect "pop-up" defensive site. For the existing population of the settlement around them, the Norman castle was a new and frightening concept; especially once they began to be reinforced with the addition of a solid stone Keep atop their central mounds. From their beginnings as Motte & Bailey fortifications, some would go on to find themselves decommissioned whilst others would grow exponentially into magnificent feats of stone built engineering. Naturally, as the concept became popular - and their benefits increasingly evident - more and more castles were built in stone from the off; which together with their slightly earlier Norman counterparts give rise to the suite of fortifications that we now have available throughout the country as a whole.

## Local Variants

The earliest strongholds in Cheshire were those at Chester, Frodsham and Halton. All originally constructed shortly after the Norman conquest circa

1070, their differing fortunes across the years illustrate well the diverse manner of destiny for the castle at large. Chester is still very much a feature of the city centre today thanks to its conversion to stone during the twelfth century and the fact that it came to play a prominent part in national history over the years that followed. Frodsham however was never converted to stone, and had fallen into disrepair come the 1300's with modern interpretations of the castle coming from the fortified manor house that replaced it. Halton sits somewhere between the two. With roots as a pre-historic defensible site, Halton enjoyed a busy history through from its inception right up to the Civil War period and although ruinous today, it's refurbishment in sandstone during the thirteenth century means that a good portion of physical evidence remains on site today; a later courthouse built in the 1700s surviving completely intact and now serving as the Castle Hotel.

I share these examples to illustrate how the popular, a-typical, image of the castle with its great walls and grand stone towers is for the most part, an historical trick of the light. It is a snapshot, frozen in time. Surviving into the modern age by way of private conservation and national schedule, they have come to represent an ideal of time and place. As such, they are vital bastions of legacy, providing a clear and defined portal through which we can view the past - but we should always try to remember that no matter how awe-inspiring these stone castles may be, they serve to show only one part of a far greater tale. For every great castle still with us today, there are a dozen

that have vanished. Castles that have left little in the way of a physical legacy, but whose ghosts inhabit the earth around their former foundations.

I've personally lost count of the amount of times I've seen a Castle Street, Castle Hill or Castle View with no sight of such a structure for miles around. Yet in most instances, on looking a little closer, such places tend to share certain details. They may be found on a modern street that follows the line of a Roman Road. They may present to the world as a children's play-area perched atop a conspicuous looking hill. More simple still, they may consist of little more than a bumpy quarter of earth in an overgrown woodland; that only after careful consideration will reveal a startling and commanding view of the land around it. It is one such place that we will explore in this piece; and one with a history so rich it should perhaps be considered as much a part of this counties heritage as any of its more famous counterparts. The lost castle of Shipbrook.

## Hidden Meanings

From the nature of its purpose to its actual location, the history of Shipbrook Castle is shrouded in mystery. A significant part of this confusion is centred on an often quoted academic view that Shipbrook was first constructed in response to the Norman-Welsh wars of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, despite the fact that Shipbrook lies more than twenty miles away from the Welsh border and much too far behind the Norman defensive network along to Dee to really find itself of practical use. My research into the

castle suggests something different. Something much more personal to its founder. There are significant clues as to the purpose of the castle when we consider its likely location; which I will share now before further exploration of its history.

Leaving the village of Davenham along Church Street, within a mile we reach Shipbrook Bridge, an ancient crossing over the River Dane where today the river is in broad flow. As the land rises gently beyond the bridge towards Shipbrook Hill Farm - once known in local record as Castle Hill - there are clear markings on the land escapement as it meets with the farm itself. These earthworks present a strong suggestion of a deliberately and defensively landscaped approach from the river. Visiting in person, the view from the farm too, back across the river towards the village of Davenham is completely befitting the strategic positioning that one would expect to find at such a site. Corroboration of these observations comes from George Omerod, a contributor to the 1882 work *The History of the County Palatine and City of Chester* who references the last remains of the castle having been cleared around 1790 to make way for the farm; itself containing antiquated sandstone in its construction suggesting the typical re-use of masonry we see at vanished sites throughout the period. This is important, as the fact that there was masonry present alludes to the castle having been viewed as important enough to have been rebuilt in stone during its early history.

But what of that history? When, comparatively speaking, the surrounding Cheshire landscape was chock-full of sites with clear and obvious military

function, was a castle needed at Shipbrook? To answer this, we must consider the brutal events that took place across the county during the winter of 1069.

## After the Harrying

Twenty years after the Norman conquest of 1066, King William I - better known to history as *William the Conqueror* - was in need of understanding. To properly assess the wealth of his new kingdom, in order to tax it, he commissioned a great survey, sending riders out to every corner of England, collecting information on everything from livestock and plough-hands to bridges and slaves; the results of which were bound together for eternity in that now world-famous tome, the *Domesday Book*.

Although the hamlet of Shipbrook is today considered part of Davenham, at the time of the great survey it was valued independently and in fact was found to be worth double the income of its neighbour with an “annual value to lord” of 10 shillings. The manor of Shipbrook was at this point in the possession of Richard de Vernon, who had been awarded a suite of lands at the expense of the local Saxon lord Osmer following the division of holdings across Cheshire that took place in the wake of the conquest. What is most telling from the entry relating to Shipbrook, and I think the key as to Richard de Vernons founding of the castle, is in spotting just how much Shipbrook’s annual venue had had sunk during the twenty years since the Norman

takeover. Its previous annual value being placed the quite considerable figure of 1 pound, double its worth in 1086.

Such devaluation is not uncommon. During the winter of 1069, more than 75% of the population of northern England had either been killed or exiled during a campaign of brutal savagery waged by the new King in what has become known to history as the Harrying of the North. Cheshire, Derbyshire and Staffordshire were almost completely desolated during the campaign as William looked to rid his kingdom of the rebellious northern populations that were proving so troublesome to the completion of his conquest. Just how savage this campaign was is illustrated well in the writings of those who documented early Norman rule. Naturally bias and supportive of the new regime, even they found themselves unable to hide their true feelings as to the levels of barbarity that had been handed out. Writing fifty years after the event, the Anglo-Norman chronicler Orderic Vitalis wrote;

*"The King stopped at nothing to hunt his enemies. He cut down many people and destroyed homes and land. Nowhere else had he shown such cruelty. This made a real change. To his shame, William made no effort to control his fury, punishing the innocent with the guilty. He ordered that crops and herds, tools and food be burned to ashes. More than 100,000 people perished of starvation. I have often praised William but I can say nothing good about this brutal slaughter. God will punish him."*



Following the campaign, and particularly due to the scorched earth tactics employed during it, the value of land in northern England had been flawed. There was little fertile land left to cultivate crops, few animals left to care for an almost complete lack of labour available for work. Hugh d'Avranches, as 1st Earl of Chester, was charged with bringing about economic recovery in the county and duly created a number of Baronial titles through which to achieve this goal. Richard de Vernon, a veteran of Hastings, was one of those Barons, and Shipbrook provided part of his administrative collection in Cheshire alongside lands Bostock, Crewe, Davenham, Leftwich.

In such a ravaged world, value was switched from the immediately economic to the more strategic, and it is most likely in light of this that of all the lands at his disposal, Richard de Vernon chose Shipbrook as his Baronial seat due to the settlements position overlooking a river crossing on the Dane. This would have made Shipbrook his most valuable asset, as control of such a river crossing effectively meant a control of trade. As such, the construction of a fortification at Shipbrook would have been necessary almost immediately.

## History Makers

From its base at Shipbrook, the Vernon family would begin a regional dynasty that would see their name etched into the history of both Cheshire and Derbyshire to such an extent that any visit we today make to an local

historical site, country house, cathedral or even large parish church, is more often than not accompanied by the Vernon coat of arms being proudly displayed somewhere in the vicinity.

The family's roots may have been back in the *Eure* region of Normandy, but their Cheshire holdings had given them such a foothold in the new kingdom that they would help shape the fortunes of not just the county, but of England itself in the centuries to come. Richard de Vernon would go on to marry Adzelia, daughter of William Peverel (reputedly an illegitimate son of William the Conqueror himself) and would become advisor to Williams son, King Henry I, during the difficult early years of his reign. So close in fact did Richard become to the new King, that he was often the sole signatory to Henry's charters and decrees. No doubt, rising to such a position would have provided the perfect time at which to refurbish Shipbrook, and may well have the point at which it became fully rebuilt in stone.

Following his death in 1107, by which time Richard de Vernon had expanded his personal empire significantly with lands in Devon, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and on the Isle of Wight, Shipbrook was an established military and economic centre in the North. Over the following three hundred years the castle would continue to prosper as the Vernon family's influence grew England as a whole. But as with many such families of the period, great Baronial power was often a source of political conflict and the fortunes of castles such as Shipbrook were only ever one twist of fate away from sudden decline.

Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, England was an incredibly turbulent place. Rival claimants to the throne would constantly be competing for influence and looking for opportunity throughout the period in a run of uncertainty that would only find grounding come the establishment of the Tudor dynasty following the death of Richard III in 1485. Such chaos was often inspired by the broken bonds of faith between the crown and the powerful families in regional seats on which the King was so reliant for support. Come the year 1400, the time for Shipbrook to play on such a stage was fast approaching.

The Percys were a powerful family from Northumberland and their lands formed an integral part of England's border defences against the Scots. They had long been staunch supporters of Henry IV and had played a vital role in his war with Richard II that had put him on the throne in 1399. When the war ended however, it didn't take long for relations to sour. The Percys had been promised various favours as a condition of their support. With Henry's crown now secured, these promises had seemingly turned to dust. Worse still, the new lands promised to them had instead been gifted to rival families. The Percys took it personally.

Lead by Henry "Hotspur" Percy, in 1403, the family mustered their regional connections and began a march south. A number of high ranking figures had rallied to join their retinue, all similarly slighted by the King and keen for redress, but it wasn't until they reached Cheshire that their forces finally took the shape of a dangerous concern. Cheshire contained a wealth of experienced

soldiers including the famed Cheshire Bowmen, many of which had once formed part of the Royal bodyguard of Richard II. They were no fans of the new King, as few in Cheshire were following his attempt to destroy much of its infrastructure during his conflict with Richard, and an estimated 7000 souls joined the campaign as the Percys came through the county; chief amongst them, one Sir Richard Vernon of Shipbrook Castle. With Welsh reinforcements joining them along the Cheshire border, the now bolstered Hotspur army moved on south again with a plan to meet both the forces of the King and those of his son - the future King Henry V - in a decisive act of battle. Come the evening of the 21st July, the Percys got what they were after, as more than 25,000 troops found themselves in action at Shrewsbury.

It was the first time in history that English bowmen had faced one another in combat and the toll on each side was great, but the Cheshire Bowmen had superior skill, the young Prince Henry himself receiving an arrow to the face that almost killed him and left him with a life long scar. As the battle wore on, the rebels were looking the more likely victors, and this seems to have inspired Henry Percy himself to try and bring matters to a close with a direct charge at the King. As Percy and his men crashed into the royal ranks however, Percy, lifting the visor on his helmet to better look for the King, was struck by an arrow. He died where he fell. It was a rapid turn of events. The battle was over and the Percys, together with their Cheshire supporters, were defeated.

Sir Richard Vernon would have been a significant player on the day and perhaps even more so during the build up to the battle. His influence from Shipbrook would have played a large part in organising the Cheshire force; something that illustrates just how important his Baronial seat had become. In defeat however, it would only follow that his contribution be addressed as a matter of treason. Taken prisoner, he was sent to Shrewsbury gaol before being hanged, drawn and quartered and having his head placed on a spike atop the city walls. Safe to say, for Shipbrook, things would never be the same again. The last in the line of the Shipbrook Vernons comes in the aftermath of Shrewsbury, with the 10th Baron, Sir James Vernon of Lostock and Haslington. Son of Sir Thomas Vernon and Joan Lostock, upon inheriting the Shipbrook Barony in 1404, James Vernon's family was already more than comfortable with life at Haslington Hall some 12 miles to the south. As a result, it was the beginning of an inevitable end for life at the castle, and shortly after James Vernons inheritance, it slips away from the record as a strategic concern.

The story of Shipbrook Castle is one that lasts for the better part of 350 years. From it's origins as a look-out over the River Dane through it's function as a Baronial seat of Royal influence, and on to its decline following Sir Richard Vernons gruesome end in 1403, Shipbrook played a pivotal role in not only the development of Cheshire, but of wider events in England as a whole.

Today the castle's former site is occupied by Shipbrook Hill Farm and the lovely Riverside Organic Cafe, where during summer months, families will take their children to sit above the river bank, look at the grazing animals and enjoy ice cream from the local dairy. Whilst there, they will cast their eyes out across the Dane, over the river crossing and on towards the pastures of Davenham; few realising just how much their experience connects with the very reasons that was chosen as the Baronial home of Richard de Vernon almost 1000 years ago.

Had the Battle of Shrewsbury turned out differently and Sir Richard Vernon's direct line survived as a result, it is entirely probable that the ruins of Shipbrook Castle would still stand today in a form that we would immediately recognise in that romantic, classic ideal of the English castle. And perhaps, in that recognition, we would find that this otherwise unassuming corner of Cheshire would be known throughout the region as the treasure trove of local history that it truly deserves to be.

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