

Pembroke

a short history

The town of Pembroke can trace its origins back 900 years when, in 1093, Arnulph de Montgomery arrived with a force of conquering Normans and erected a wooden fortification on the spot where the castle now stands. He also founded the Benedictine Priory of Monkton in 1098 on the site of a much earlier Christian settlement.

However, below the castle there is evidence of a much earlier human habitation dating back some 12,000 years in the Wogan's Cavern and in Priory Farm Cave a short distance away above the Pembroke River. Later, the indications are that the existing castle would have been the site of a fortified Celtic settlement.

In 1102 Henry I exiled the treacherous Arnulph and appointed Gerald de Windsor Castellain of Pembroke Castle. He also gave Gerald the Welsh Princess Nest's hand in marriage and granted Pembroke its first charter. Pembroke stood strong against Welsh insurgency: South Pembrokeshire was colonized by English and Flemings which in effect made it culturally English, earning it the name "Little England Beyond Wales".

The Earldom of Pembroke was created in 1138 The first Earl, Gilbert de Clare was granted palatinate powers to further strengthen Pembroke against Welsh attack. He was succeeded by his son Earl Richard Strongbow, the man who led the conquest of Ireland in 1169. The landing in that year at Wexford by Maurice Fitzgerald, son of Nest, with 400 Flemish bowmen from Pembroke saw the start of the powerful Fitzgerald dynasty whose descendants include the Fitzgerald Kennedys. The invasion was launched from Pembroke where, in the autumn of 1171, Henry II ordered the 400 strong English fleet to assemble in the Haven, the largest ever gathering of warships there.



Strongbow's daughter and heiress Isabel was married to the great William Marshall, who became Earl of Pembroke in 1189. During this time Pembroke Castle took its present structure built in stone, with its Norman Hall and distinctive, cylindrical Great Keep or Donjon. Pembroke town grew and prospered in the shadow of the castle. The historic core of the town was established then, of a long main street flanked by shops, businesses and houses constructed in burgage plots, protected on three sides by water and surrounded by walls. The second charter by Henry II confirmed Pembroke's privileged status: all merchant ships were required to report to the customs house in Pembroke making it the centre of trade for the whole of the Milford Haven Waterway.

During the Wars of the Roses, town & castle wavered in support of warring Lancastrian & Yorkist factions. In 1447 Jasper Tudor (half brother to Henry IV) was appointed Earl of Pembroke and into his care was sent the young Margaret Beaufort who gave birth to a son in Pembroke Castle, a son destined to become Henry VII and founder of the Tudor dynasty. His son Henry VIII succeeded as Earl of Pembroke and bestowed the title of Marchioness to his wife Anne Boleyn in 1532. It was during this reign that Pembroke's fortunes fell: the Act of Union 1536 took away Pembroke's Palatine status and brought to an end the Earldom. The Second Act of Union 1543 gave Haverfordwest county status & effectively became the county town. The title of Earl of Pembroke became a title in name only. Monkton Priory too fell victim to the English Reformation and the Dissolution of the Monasteries. These were times of decline.



However, Pembroke rose to national notice again in the following century. John Poyer, a staunch parliamentarian, became mayor in 1641 and in 1642 all of Wales declared for the king apart from Pembroke & Tenby. Unfortunately, Poyer later changed sides and, in what was to become the second civil war in 1648, subjected Pembroke to a lengthy siege which was conducted by Cromwell himself. Poyer surrendered and was executed, while much of the castle and walls of Pembroke were demolished.

These were bad times indeed but it would appear that Pembroke saw a revival of its fortunes in the 18th Century when Daniel Defoe described it as the richest and most flourishing town in South Wales. Pembroke was now the major port on Milford Haven and trade was booming. Many of the houses in the Main Street date from this time, built in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in a simple Georgian style. Many were rebuilt on mediaeval sites and still incorporate the earlier fabric including undercrofts.

Pembroke's fortunes took a down turn in the 19th Century: much maritime trade was taken by Haverfordwest & Milford and the opening of the railway in 1866 resulted in the gradual decline of Pembroke's shipping industry. The last trading vessel to sail up to the Pembroke Quay was the Kathleen and May in 1952.

Pembroke, unlike Pembroke Dock, was left unscathed by the blitz of WWII. It was after the Second World War that Pembroke was to change dramatically: until then it was largely still confined within its walls and the Mediaeval layout of burgage plots was almost intact. After the war Pembroke saw a huge expansion of housing while much of Monkton was destroyed to create a new council house development. In 1972 Pembroke was designated a Conservation Area in recognition of its national historic importance and architectural merit.