

### WNFC Field Meeting held at Croft Castle 16 June 2022

On one of the hottest days of the year-so far, twenty one members of the Club and two guests gathered in the car park at Croft Castle with the President, David Whitehead as their guide. David explained that during the last ten years he had regularly been involved, in an informal way, in various projects relating to Croft. Sometimes this was in his capacity as local correspondent for the Garden Trust, but more recently he was invited by the project manager for the Fishpool Valley Project, Imogen Sambrook, to collaborate with the Volunteer Research Group at Croft in investigating historical sources pertinent for the restoration of the valley *elysium*. He was also involved, albeit remotely, between 2001-3 with Hereford Archaeology's excavations on the south and west fronts of the Castle.

David's first stop was at the castellated screen, which marks the entrance to the pleasure ground where he explained the complicated 18th-century history of the Castle. Having been lost by the Croft family and purchased in 1746 by the iron-founder Richard Knight of Downton he passed it on to his heir and daughter, Elizabeth, who married an obscure Welsh landowner, Thomas Johnes. She eventually sold Croft c.1790 after a dispute with her son, who had recently built The Hafod, near Aberystwyth in Cardiganshire. Croft was bought by Somerset Davies, a Ludlow mercer and M.P. for the town. David believed that the gothic entrance screen was probably the last structure added to Croft by Elizabeth Johnes (Fig.1).



Figure 1. The castellated screen at the entrance to the pleasure ground



Figure 2. Croft Castle and church

The group moved down to view the Castle itself (Fig. 2). David described how it had been deliberately demolished in 1645 by the Royalists, after the death of Sir William Croft at the battle of Stokesay. His youngest son Herbert (1603-91) inherited Croft in 1659, a year before he became Bishop of Hereford. Whilst supervising extensive renovations at Hereford Cathedral, he rebuilt Croft.

Recent tree ring dating confirms that virtually every timber in the castle dates from this period but some of the masonry in the body of the building is probably much earlier, including the bases of the four corner towers, which have been the subject of much debate. The guide book (revised, 2009), reflecting recent thinking, suggests that they were products of the chivalric revivalism which permeated the last years of Elizabeth I's reign and is epitomised by Lulworth Castle, Dorset and Ruperra in Glamorgan; both houses have slender token corner towers. The builder of the castle would thus have been Sir James Croft (c1518-90), an old gallant of the Elizabethan Court.

From the south and west terraces of the Castle, David described the elaborate Renaissance parterres that were constructed in the 16th century and subsequently after 1660 in a more baroque manner by Bishop Herbert Croft. Hereford Archaeology commissioned a sketch reconstructing the elaborate enclosures and terraces, which David produced.

The group moved to the parish church to look at the fine monument of Sir Richard Croft (1487-1509) and his wife Eleanor Mortimer (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Monument to Sir Richard Croft (1487-1509) and his wife Eleanor Mortimer

Here David read out part of an unpublished article he had written making the case for Sir Richard as the builder of Croft on the basis that (1) Richard accumulated huge wealth because of his support for the Yorkist kings Edward IV and Richard III and (2) Sir James Croft was almost bankrupt in the late 16th century and, for all intents and purposes, banished from the court of Elizabeth because of a feud with



the earl of Leicester. David pointed out that there were other local parallels to Croft in the late 15th century e.g. Treago Castle, St Weonards and Bronsil Castle, Eastnor – also built by staunch Yorkists.

After a brief respite in the church David led the group to the Fishpool Valley and explained that the restoration had been accelerated by ash die-back, which was especially virulent at Croft, and involved much hauling of timber which damaged the paths. Whilst this progressed a decision was taken to renew all the dams in the valley to improve water retention and make conditions better for the native water crayfish (Figs 4 and 5).



Figure 4. Fishpool Valley, cascade built into a dam

As a prelude to the rebuilding some archaeology was carried-out, which indicated that in the mid-18th century, perhaps when the Knights took over the estate, a more elaborate and in some places, formal water garden was developed, which included an ashlar bath house. This was eventually swept away for a more informal and picturesque approach. Various recreational buildings from this period still survive including a domed stone summer house, grotto and a later cold plunge in a side valley (Fig.6). There was also a nineteenth-century lime kiln set in its own quarry (Fig. 7).





Figure 5. Fishpool Valley, tunnel to allow crayfish to move between the pools



Figure 6. The grotto, grotto pool and dam.





Figure 7. Lime Kiln

David suggested a deeper exploration on another day since the Trust had opened up a higher level of footpaths which provided fine views of the valley. Following the northern track home the party became divided and the exploration ended with a scramble down a steep slope, ankle deep in beech leaves, to one of lower dams across the stream.

The experience was probably closer to the sublime than the picturesque but there were no casualties and we all gathered at the National Trust café or a well-earned cup of tea and energy-restoring cakes before making our way home.

David Whitehead