

The Mystery of Rose Castle Tower

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On the roadside between Millin Chapel and Picton Ferry, at SN005127, there is a very mysterious castellated tower. It's ruinous, and has been for a long time, and although it looks like a typical south Pembrokeshire church tower it's minute -- less than 30 ft high and with a footprint only 9 ft x 9 ft. It stands in strange isolation in the garden of Church House, not far from Rose Castle Farm. I happened upon it as I was passing that way in the spring of 2017.

There is no building attached to the tower, but one can see on its north-west side evidence of a past structure with a steeply pitched roof. There are two doors into the tower, one of which has been converted into a window, and seven other small arched windows which have an ecclesiastical look about them.

Until recently the tower was hidden from view by a line of tall trees on a hedgebank -- and this might explain why hardly anybody has drawn attention to it. It's not mentioned in any of the recent texts (such as the Pevsner Guide to Pembrokeshire or Smith's book on Welsh buildings) dealing with our historic buildings. Neither is it mentioned by Francis Jones in 1996, by Thornhill Timmins in 1923, by Richard Fenton in his *Historic Tour of Pembrokeshire* (1811), or by George Owen in his *Description of Penbrokeshire* (1603). So

how was it missed by all these observant and well-informed people? It's not listed for protection by Cadw, and the only official record of it is in the *Archwilio* database, where it is described as "probably a late medieval (?) tower-house". The record also draws attention to the fact that on a 1932 map a church was recorded on this site. There is a brief discussion of its origins in a 1948 publication called *The Slebech Story*, edited by Rev B.L.I. Morris.

So is it a last relic of a ruined church? Or a medieval tower house? Or a quirky nineteenth century dwelling? Or (given its prominent position in the Daugleddau Estuary) a light tower or beacon? Or maybe even a Victorian folly?

There has been a vigorous and wide-ranging debate about the tower on the *Heritage and History of Wales* Facebook page, and in this article I summarise the erudite points made by many historians, some of whom have visited the tower. I offer sincere thanks to all of them.

The Location

The tower lies on gently sloping ground, not far from Picton Point. It is situated within Slebech Parish, not far from its western boundary. On the other side of Millin Pill lies Boulston parish. Boulston Church, on the shore of the Western Cleddau, was used until 1945, but now lies in ruins. In the oldest records, from the Twelfth Century, Boulston Church is mentioned, together with an associated chapel at Pincheton, Piketon or Pickton. Both the church and the chapel lay within the Boulston estate. But where was it? There would be no reason for a chapel to be located within a mile or two of Boulston Church, but it would make sense for a "chapel-of-ease" to be located on the far side of Millin Pill, where it could be used by worshippers in the event of bad weather. So the location of Rose Castle Tower would be just about right

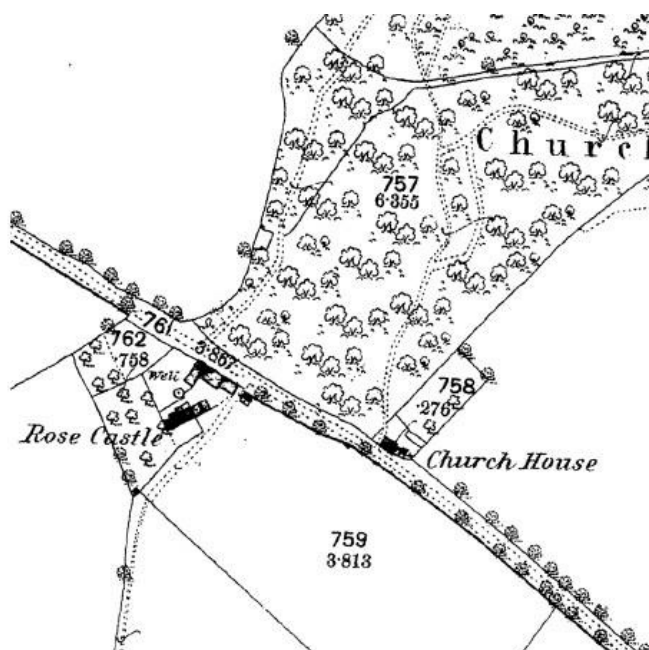


Within Slebech Parish, in the Middle Ages, there were two great estates, centred on the fortified residence of Picton Castle and the grand mansion of Slebech. As far as we know, there never was a Picton parish, although in the early days of the Picton estate there must certainly have been a township (and a population of several hundred) here in the style of Anglo-Norman settlements all over South Pembrokeshire. One assumes that a church must have been an essential component of a township. There is a chapel within the castle, but there is no trace of any ecclesiastical building anywhere else near the Picton Castle motte (the original fortified site) or the modern castle site. Neither is there any trace of a graveyard. So the only candidate for a possible church appears to be Rose Castle Tower, less than a mile from the castle and reached by an easy walk past the old estate kennels and "pheasantry" and thence through Church Wood. But there are no old maps which show the location of a sacred site with any degree of accuracy.

When it comes to the relation of the site to Slebech Hall, things get even more complicated, because of the involvement of the Slebech estate with the Knight's Hospitallers which began at the time of the crusades. Large tracts of land, and many early medieval churches, were gifted to the Commandery although the religious establishments continued to be patronised by the powerful landowners. Both Boulston and Slebech Churches came under the control of the Knights Hospitallers, and so did the church or chapel at Picton. Initially the religious buildings owned by the Knights were well endowed, and had their own clergy, but after the end of the Crusades many fell into disrepair; those which were supported by the wealthiest landowners survived, but others became derelict before the end of the eighteenth century. Was this the fate of an old church that once existed at or near Rose Castle? The latest date for which a priest is assigned to Picton Church is 1717, with John Wogan of Boulston as patron -- but why is there no trace of it in the maps published in the previous century?

The Name

There are many theories about the name. The simplest one is that "Rose" is a corruption of "Rhos" -- given that the hamlet of Rhos is not far away, and that this was also the name of the old administrative unit that existed between the Western and Eastern Cleddau tidal estuaries. There are many mentions of "Rose Castle Point" (now called Picton Point) in maps going back to the sixteenth century. Sometimes it was spelt "Rice Castle", as on the Saxton map of 1578, the John Speed map of 1610 and the Robert Morden map dated 1695. There is a defensive embankment or rath on the point which has never been excavated. It might be an Iron Age feature -- or it might be medieval. In any case, might this structure have originally been called "Castell Rhos" or "Rhos Castle"? Detailed research in the Picton estate records might unearth the answer to this question.

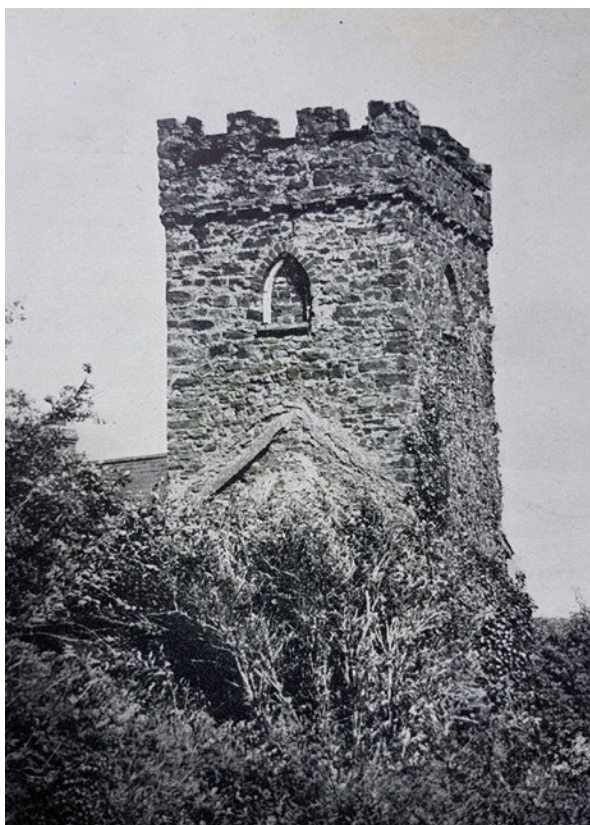


Another theory about the name is that it is related to the Knights Hospitallers. One of their symbols was the rose -- and as we all know from our reading of *The Da Vinci Code* one of the key locations in the search for truth is Rosslyn chapel not far from Loanhead in Scotland. Roslin / Rosslyn / Rose / Llyn -- significant, or not? To make matters even more intriguing, in the ruins of Boulston Church there are two carved rose emblems on Wogan family memorial stones, one with four petals and the other with six or seven. The rose was featured on the family coat of arms. If the rose was a significant symbol to the west of Millin Pill, why not to the east as well?

More straightforward is the theory that the castellated tower is itself the castle recognised in the name. After all, it looks like a defensive feature designed to repel its attackers and defend its residents -- and if it looks like a miniature castle, maybe that is what it was. But surely it's too small to provide any realistic defence against an attack? Maybe its builder or

original occupant had the name Rice or Rhys? Many questions, but no convincing answers.....

Another intriguing feature of the name is the association with Church Wood. The tower is located at the roadside, near the edge of the wood. On the tithe map of 1846 just one building is shown on this site, at the position of the tower. The schedule shows no church land here. But in 1886 the Picton Castle Estate papers include the plan of a new cottage at Church House. OS maps from 1888 and later show an elongated dwelling on the roadside, called Church House. A later OS map shows just one dwelling, called "Church Cottage", precisely at the position of the tower. That's all a bit of a mystery, since other maps refer to "Church Cottages" set further away from the road. Cartographic inaccuracies? Whatever the truth of the matter, there must have been two or more dwellings here. Was the land on which the cottages were built originally owned by the church? Maybe, but in the nineteenth century the buildings were certainly occupied by tenants of the Picton Castle estate. It's probable that these residences were named because they were either on the site of a long lost church or chapel, or adjacent to an ecclesiastical building that lay in ruins.

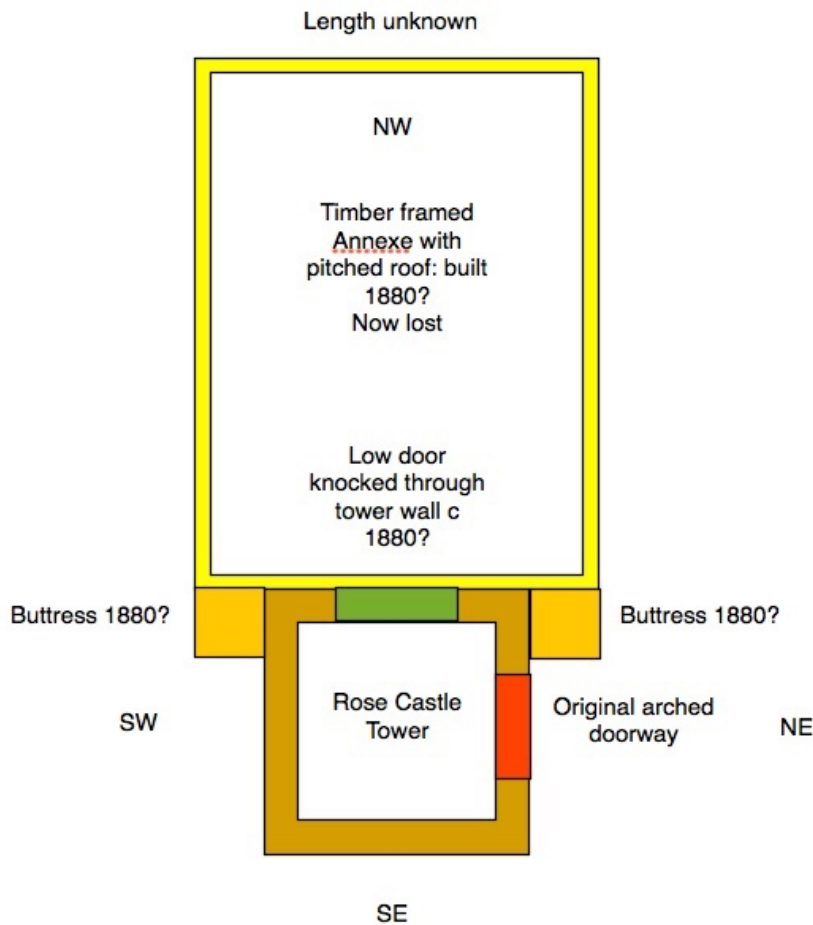


Rose Castle Tower as it appeared in 1948, and as it looks today. For most of the intervening period, it has been hidden behind a row of tall trees.

The Building

The tower is indeed very strange. It's less than 30 ft high, and each of the four walls is about 9 feet wide. So the building is square in plan. The walls are less than 2 feet thick, but even so, the inside of the tower was hardly spacious enough to have been lived in, except by very small children. The stonework is quite rough, and few of the stones are

ROSE CASTLE TOWER PLAN



dressed. They all appear to have been derived from local Millstone Grit sandstones, quartzites and mudstones, which might have come from a small quarry near Millin Chapel. Is the building too “crude” to have been a church tower?

Towards the top of the tower there is some modest external corbelling, and the castellations look authentic enough -- like many of those on the tops of Pembrokeshire’s tall church towers. The roof (which incorporated lead and slates) has fallen in, so the inside of the tower is now open to the elements. It’s difficult to see whether there was a platform or floor at the top of the tower sufficient to support the weight of humans; but there are traces of floor supports halfway up the

tower, and traces on all four internal walls of a staircase that ran up to it. On the inside of the SE tower wall (facing the gate) the staircase ran across a blocked-in window. So the windows came first, and the staircase came later. The inside walls have at various times been plastered. In the southern corner of the tower interior there is a big cavity in the stonework at ground level, but there is no sign of a fireplace or flue. There are no traces of internal vaulting or other old supporting or ornamental structures -- so the recent consensus among experts is that the building was never a medieval tower house, even though this was suggested by the *Archwilio* surveyor in 1976.

In the tithe map of 1846 we see just a small square building. But on the NW side of the tower there was once an attached rectangular building with a pitched roof. The roofline is clearly visible today on the stonework; the ridge was about 15 feet above the ground. The lower parts of the roofline extended beyond both tower sides, by c 3 feet, supported on solid stone “buttresses” which appear to be younger than the original tower; the stonework is somewhat crudely tied in. This means that on its NW side the building was about 15 feet wide externally. Beneath the roofline traces on the tower, there are remnants of plasterwork. Without excavation there is no way of telling how long the building was, since there is now a roadside hedge in the way. Where the gable end of the building might have been, there is now a garden pond. Possibly the hedge incorporates part of a masonry wall? It does incorporate some large stones. However, according to the Williams family of Rose Castle Farm, they found no trace of footings or stone walls when they dug out the garden pond a few years ago, and they say that there are local memories of a timber-



One of the high windows, showing the brick arch and the later brick infill. This window has no window sill.

framed building joined to the tower. This makes sense, since there are no signs of any stonework connected at 90 degrees to the outer ends of the “buttresses”. It looks as if they were built to provide stability for the tower and to accommodate flush-fitting timber posts.

There used to be two doors into the base of the tower. One of them, on the NW wall and beneath the remnants of the pitched roofline, is still open. It's about 3 ft wide and 5 ft high, and is structurally unstable since it has no arch and no lintel. Maybe it was originally supported by a wooden frame which has since rotted away. Was it hacked out after the tower was built, to give access to the timber-framed annexe? The other doorway, on the NE wall, has a beautiful brick arch and looks like the original tower entrance. But at some stage it has been blocked up and refashioned with a small rectangular window centrally located. Above it, externally, there are faint signs of a horizontal roofline, suggesting that there was a low lean-to building attached. Below the roofline, the wall was plastered. What was the purpose

of this second and very small annexe? Was it entered from within the tower when the door was in use, or does it date from the time of the later window? In that case, the annexe must have had its own external entrance. Careful surveying is clearly needed.

The seven arched windows of the tower are enigmatic, to say the least. Internally they are all square, with shale or mudstone slabs or oak beams used as lintels. Four have external window sills. Externally, all of the windows have brick arches, flush with the outside walls. At some stage all of the windows have been blocked up on the inside with rough stonework. And all of the windows have been bricked up on the outside too, with the brickwork set back about 4 inches, making it appear from a distance that they were simply ornamental window recesses. So there have been several identifiable phases in the evolution of the tower windows. Over what period of time did these changes take place, and what might have been their purpose? One explanation for the bricking up of the windows might be the avoidance of the window tax which was not repealed until 1851.

One clue to the age and origins of Rose Castle Tower lies in the bricks that have been used, especially in the windows and doors. Bricks have been used in Britain at least since Roman times, but prior to the Industrial Revolution, when mass production and size standardisation came in, bricks tended to be flatter than those of today, more variable in texture and colour, and with rougher and softer edges. There appear to be both “ancient”

and “modern” bricks in the tower, and no doubt a building history could be worked out by a brick expert! Some of the bricks used in the arches appear to be sharp-edged and quite modern; but many of those used in the bricking up of the arches look older. That’s an anomaly, and maybe we should explain it by assuming that the filling-in was done by builders who simply used whatever they could find from ruinous buildings in the neighbourhood. Some “old” bricks also appear to have been used in the fabric of the tower itself, and this might give an expert the chance of getting an accurate “fix” on the tower’s age.



The internal appearance of one of the rectangular windows. This one has no window sill. We can see a wooden lintel, the inside face of the brick arch, the remains of a stone infilling and also the brick infill of the arch.

Solving the Mystery

So what was the purpose of the Rose Castle Tower, and when was it built? We have already dismissed the idea that it was a medieval tower house, since it’s too small and since there are no signs of medieval vaulting. We can also dismiss the idea that it is a Victorian folly built for the amusement of the gentry, since the earliest maps of the area (including the tithe maps) show that there was an older building on this site which was called “Rose Castle” or something similar. The old names “Church House” and “Church Cottages” suggest an ecclesiastical origin, and I doubt that the Victorian owners of Picton Castle (the Philipps family) would ever have built a folly on or adjacent to a site that was once deemed sacred.

If the tower really is ancient, three possibilities remain. The first is that the tower was a medieval or later watch tower, built here because it is located on gently sloping land providing a fine view over Picton Point (Rose Castle Point) and the inner parts of the Daugleddau estuary. As pointed out above, it never was a tower capable of being defended; it is too small, its walls are not thick enough, and the slit windows typical of medieval castles and fortified dwellings are here completely absent. A building with seven pretty arched windows and two doors was clearly not intended to repel invaders! Might the tower have had a beacon mounted on its roof? That’s a possibility, since it is located within a few hundred yards of Picton Ferry, which must originally have been the site of the private quay used by the Picton Estate. A tower-mounted blazing brazier guiding seaborne traffic towards the quay is an appealing possibility.

The second possibility is that the tower was indeed a part of "Pickton Church" and that its origins go back to the twelfth century. One thing that militates against this theory is the very small size of the tower; it's even smaller than the "old" tower of Llawhaden Church which was incorporated into something far more spectacular in the fifteenth century. And then we have the problematic presence of all those windows. As a general rule, Pembrokeshire church towers do not have abundant windows in them, either arched or rectangular in shape. Some of them have slit windows, and some have grilled or slatted openings high up to allow the sound of the bells to escape. But a castellated tower with seven big windows is quite exceptional. Might it have been a freestanding bell tower associated with a chapel or small church located where Chapel House now stands?

The third possibility is that this was built as a hunting stand or hunting lodge -- maybe as far back as Tudor times. There was a deer-park on the Picton Estate to the north of the castle, but it's reasonable to assume that there might also have been hunting closer to the river in medieval times. There are records of pheasants being raised in Church Woods, which presumably were then hunted, shot and devoured. This might explain the small size and extreme simplicity of the tower -- designed maybe just for a handful of huntsmen to climb up the staircase to the top, from which they could spot game-birds or deer from a reasonable distance without disturbing them, while at the same time enhancing their chances of successful kills?

The windows have a complicated history, and here and there in the window surrounds bricks are embedded into the stonework. Careful dating of the bricks used in the arches, walls and "blocking up" brickwork might suggest a time sequence. Some clues might also be found in the ruins of Boulston and Slebech Churches, where brickwork was used at various stages to repair and improve the buildings, in between episodes of neglect and decay. For example, we know from written records that the old Slebech Church was repaired with brickwork in 1766 and then again in the nineteenth century -- were similar bricks used at Rose Castle Tower, and might the same craftsmen have done the work?

So we are not much further forward. Bring on the experts in building methods and design features; bring on the antiquarians who know where the ancient documents are to be found, and who know what to look for; and bring on the archaeologists, who might actually need to do some digging, with the permission of the landowner. For a start, the building needs to be carefully surveyed and its characteristics recorded. Some day we will get an authentic ruling on how old the tower is, and what it was used for.

But finally, let's delve further into the records. We can find some additional information in the census returns. In the schedule accompanying the Tithe Map of 1846 the church cottage site is not recorded as church land, but as a place of residence. In 1861 John Phillips and his wife and daughter are recorded as resident in the "Old Church." The use of that name is a major clue. In 1871 John Phillips and his wife and two younger girls are recorded as living in "Church Cottage." By 1881 the Phillips family had gone, and Church Cottage was occupied by John and Elizabeth Evans and seven children. A big family! (In 1871 they had lived in one of the two "Slate Cottages" -- now lost-- on the other side of the road.) On the 1888 OS map an elongated building is shown as a dwelling. Church House is also shown as a separate building, just a few yards away. Could this have been a restoration or rebuilding of the original ruined church? And in the 1891 census, "Old Church Cottage" is shown as being uninhabited, with a carpenter called Thomas Harries and his wife and two small children resident in a new Church Cottage (presumably built in 1886). All very confusing, and there has to be a suspicion that several



different buildings on this site, during the nineteenth century, have been called "Church Cottage". This appears to be confirmed by the map evidence too.

Purely by chance, on a visit in May 2017 I spotted a plaque above the roof-line on the NW tower wall, with the date "1880" just about visible. With the help of a ladder I examined it closely in October 2017 and discovered that the plaque is superficial, made with wet cement into which the numbers have been inscribed. It is not built into the wall -- and so it is a late

addition to the tower. So notwithstanding all of the speculation in the foregoing paragraphs about what had gone before, we now have to believe that this was date on which the timber-framed annexe was added to the tower.

My own theory, for what it's worth, is that the tower was originally a free-standing bell tower built near a little church or chapel-of-ease which was on the site of the current Church House. Expert opinion is needed to determine whether it really is medieval. Church House itself has been changed many times, and I'm informed that there are very thick and ancient walls at its core. Maybe the church was deconsecrated and unused by 1750 and increasingly derelict after that, but then repaired and reconstructed as a place of residence. We now know that in 1886 a cottage "extension" was added to Church House, creating a long semi-detached building with residences for two families. The tower probably fell into disrepair as well, but in 1880 it was modified for storage or agricultural purposes, with the addition of flanking "buttresses" and the timber-framed annexe. The internal floor and staircase were added at the same time, and the original arched doorway was blocked and replaced by a small window. A new doorway was knocked through the NW tower wall to allow access from the annexe. The annexe may have survived until the time of the Second World War.

The earliest photo which we have of the tower is dated 1948. By then, it was ruinous, and the attached building or annexe had gone. Beyond the tower, we can see that Church House was in good condition, and we can also see the roofline of Church Cottage. According to the owner of Rose Caste Farm, the cottage was destroyed in a fire in the 1950's which resulted in the death of one budgerigar and one dog. Then, maybe less than 50 years ago, the tower's roof fell in, and it was abandoned to its fate as a quirky feature of the Church House garden. Church House was also rebuilt and extended.

By some miracle, the tower still stands, in spite of its miniature scale and flimsy construction. There are other enigmatic buildings in Pembrokeshire, including a beehive hermit hut that might just be a pigsty and a strange residence at Druidston that might just have been built by the tellytubbies -- but Rose Castle Tower is the most mysterious of all.

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See also: <https://archives.library.wales/downloads/picton-castle-estate-records.pdf>