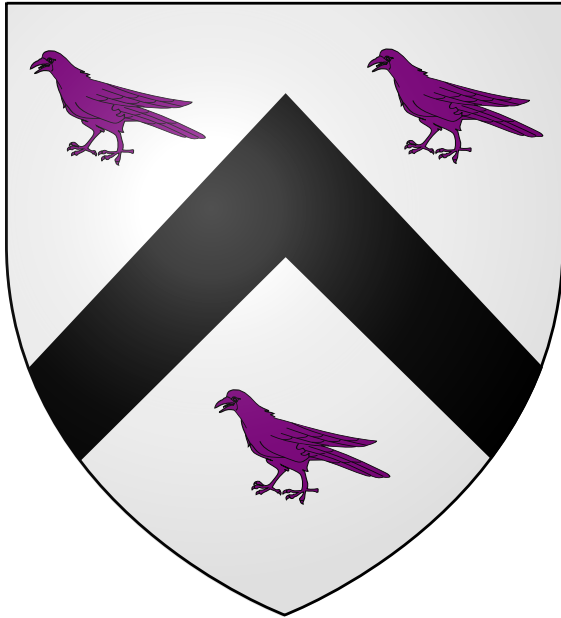


Rhys ap Gruffydd (rebel)



The coat of arms of Rhys's family

Rhys ap Gruffydd (1508–1531) was a powerful Welsh landowner who was accused of rebelling against King Henry VIII by plotting with James V of Scotland to become Prince of Wales. He was executed as a rebel. He married Lady Catherine Howard (b. abt 1499 Ashwellthorpe, Norfolk, England), the daughter of Thomas Howard, 2nd Duke of Norfolk and his second wife Agnes Tilney.

1 Early life

Rhys was the grandson of Rhys ap Thomas, the most powerful man in Wales and close ally of Henry VII. Rhys was a descendant of the medieval Welsh king Rhys ap Gruffydd (1132–1197), his namesake. His father, Gruffydd ap Rhys ap Thomas, died in 1521, leaving him his grandfather's heir. In 1524 Rhys married Catherine Howard, daughter of Thomas Howard, 2nd Duke of Norfolk.^[1]

As his grandfather's heir, Rhys expected to inherit his estates and titles. When Rhys ap Thomas died in 1525, Henry VIII gave his most important titles and powers to Walter Devereux, Lord Ferrers, leading to a feud between Rhys and Ferrers which escalated over the next few years.

2 Conflict with Ferrers

Rhys attempted to increase his status in Wales, petitioning Cardinal Thomas Wolsey to be given various posts. Potential for conflict with Ferrers increased when both men were given the right to extend their number of retainers; this led to the emergence of competing armed gangs.^[2] The bad-blood between Rhys and Ferrers reached a crisis-point in June 1529 when Ferrers made a display of his status during preparations for the annual Court of Great Sessions in Carmarthen. Rhys, surrounded by forty armed men, threatened Ferrers with a knife. Rhys was arrested and imprisoned in Carmarthen Castle. Rhys's wife Catherine escalated the situation by collecting hundreds of her supporters and attacking the castle. She later threatened Ferrers himself with an armed gang. In the conflict between the two factions several of Ferrers's men were killed. The factions continued to cause other disruptions over the coming months, leading to deaths in street-fights and acts of piracy.

3 Treason charges

The rebellious actions of Rhys's supporters led to Rhys's transfer to prison in London by 1531. By this stage Henry was claiming that Rhys was attempting to overthrow his government in Wales. Rhys had added the title Fitz-Urien to his name, referring to Urien, the ancient Welsh ruler of Rheged, a person of mythical significance. Rhys's accusers claimed that this was an attempt to assert himself as Prince of Wales. He was supposed to be plotting with James V of Scotland to overthrow Henry in fulfilment of ancient Welsh prophecies.

Rhys was convicted of treason and was executed in December 1531. The execution caused widespread dismay and he was openly said to have been innocent.^[2] Contemporary writer Ellis Gruffudd, however, argued that the arrogance of the Rhys family had caused their downfall, saying that "many men regarded his death as Divine retribution for the falsehoods of his ancestors, his grandfather, and great-grandfather, and for their oppressions and wrongs. They had many a deep curse from the poor people who were their neighbours, for depriving them of their homes, lands and riches."^[3]

Historian Ralph Griffith asserts that "Rhys's execution...was an act of judicial murder based on charges devised to suit the prevailing political and dynastic situa-

tion". Since it was linked to Henry's attempt to centralise power and break with the church of Rome, he argues that it "in retrospect made him [Rhys] one of the earliest martyrs of the English Reformation."^[2] Rhys was believed to be opposed to the Reformation and had spoken disparagingly of Anne Boleyn. He had also been friendly with Katherine of Aragon and Cardinal Wolsey, so riding himself of Rhys helped Henry to prepare the ground for the Reformation.^[4] The execution led to fears of a Welsh rebellion. One clergyman was concerned that the Welsh and Irish would join together.^[2]

4 Family

With his death Rhys' vast possessions were forfeit to the crown. His children are known by the Anglicised surname "Rice". His son, Griffith Rice (c.1530–1584), was restored to some of the family estates by Queen Mary.^[1] His daughter Agnes Rice had a celebrated affair with William Stourton, 7th Baron Stourton, and in defiance of the rights of his widow and children, she inherited much of the Stourton estates after his death. She later married Sir Edward Baynton, and had children by both William and Edward.

Rhys' grandson Henry Rice aka Price Rhys, born 1634 Redstone, Pembrokeshire is listed on Rootsweb along with his descendants.

5 References

- [1] Dictionary of Welsh Biography, National Library of Wales
- [2] Ralph Griffith, *Rhys ap Thomas and his Family*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1993, pp.106, 110–11.
- [3] Griffiths, p.72.
- [4] London Carmarthenshire society, *A history of Carmarthenshire*, Volume 1, Society by W. Lewis limited, 1935, p.263.

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6.1 Text

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