

BERRY POMEROY CASTLE

Totnes, South Devon TQ9 6LJ

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Having been born in Devon and lived not too far away for a large portion of my life, I have no idea why Berry Pomeroy Castle remained unvisited. Even the name is interesting! Be that as it may, we finally made the journey on a hot summer's day to the remains of the Tudor mansion that had been built within the walls of an earlier castle, standing on a high point above the Gatcombe valley, a few miles north east of Totnes.

The country roads became rather bumpy as we neared our destination, tucked away in a deep, wooded valley, which looked to offer picturesque woodland walks. There was a small but perfectly adequate car park and since we arrived just before 10:00 when the castle opened, there was no problem with parking. A short walk towards the castle brought us first of all to The Castle Café, where we sat outside and sipped a cappuccino, looking with some anticipation at the castle entrance up ahead of us - it was a perfect place to take a photo:



A pleasing entrance on a beautiful day

According to English Heritage, the Pomeroy family had owned the manor of 'Berri' for over 400 years, since it had been granted by William the Conqueror to Ralf de Pomaria, a Norman knight from La Pommeraye. However, the Pomeroy family only began to build Berry Pomeroy Castle in the late 15th century, within the grounds of an existing deer park.

Having established the origin of the castle's name, it was time to explore. The advantage of arriving at around opening time was being able to take photos without too many lurking visitors in brightly coloured clothing - what were they thinking of on such a fine summer's day?

The motive for building the castle has been mooted because Devon was allegedly the most lawless area of southern England, with many local feuds. No comment! Another possible reason was the ever-present threat of invasion from France. Whatever the truth might have been, during the Wars of the Roses (1455-1485) the Pomeroy family took the Yorkist side and the strength of the castle's fortifications at that time leaves no doubt that it was designed with serious defence in mind.

Under the Pomeroy family, the castle consisted of a dry moat, a gatehouse and ramparts that were surmounted by a curtain wall, with buildings around the wall on the inside. Few archaeological remains show exactly where these original buildings were, but the gatehouse was definitely more rewarding. Apart from being twin-turreted, its distinctive angular design enabled artillery installed within the lower levels to fire on all approaches from the front.

After climbing the steps to the first floor, my surprised eyes lighted upon a 15th century wall painting depicting the Adoration of the Magi - and I do love a wall painting from centuries gone by. This part of the castle was generating some interest and we had to wait our turn in the high roofed chamber to go and gaze at the medieval art.

It was faded, as would be expected, but it was still amazing to have survived to any degree at all. It had been discovered hidden behind a layer of thick vegetation and dated to around 1490-1500, including one of the earliest representations in England of a black wise man. It was tricky taking photos through the bars in which the area was enclosed, but I did my best!



The wonderful art of 15th century wall painting

I should explain here that on paying our entrance fee, we'd been handed an audio guide to listen to at various locations around the site. This was very welcome, as my powers of location and visual imagination are sadly lacking. I managed to become confused right at the beginning when I'd pressed a button to hear some further information and the gadget seemed to go off-piste - but on second thoughts, it could just as easily have been me going astray.

Back to the history and in 1547, the impoverished Sir Thomas Pomeroy was forced to sell his lands to Edward Seymour, 1st Duke of Somerset (c.1500-1552). This was the brother of Jane Seymour, the third and favourite queen of King Henry VIII. When the king died in 1547, Edward Seymour became Lord Protector of Henry's son, the nine-year-old King Edward VI. This gave him rather a lot of power! However, with great power comes great danger and he was executed for treason in 1552 - probably without ever having visited Berry Pomeroy.

His lands were forfeit to the Crown for a short time, but his son Lord Edward Seymour (1529-1593) was later granted several of his father's former properties, including Berry Pomeroy. He settled in Devon and set about building a courtyard house within the castle walls, starting in the early 1560s (around the time of his summons to Queen Elizabeth I's court in 1562).

It was a grandiose building in the Elizabethan style fashionable at that time - but today it was pleasantly cool wandering in and around the shell of the empty rooms open to the sky, fiddling with the audio guide and trying to locate exactly what it was describing.



Remains of the Elizabethan building

The tall, compact four-storey house was an advanced design for its time, built around three sides of the courtyard. By 1590, an east range (infilling the fourth side of the inner courtyard) had been added. Of the four storeys, there were two complete floors of accommodation above the hall and service areas. Catering for guests was obviously expected for mansion owners...



Within the empty rooms

As we walked along the outside of the Elizabethan house, with the remains of the late 15th century defensive curtain wall to our right, I was intrigued to see horizontal lines scored along the wall of the house that the friendly audio guide told me were original marks from the Seymour time, put there for climbing plants. I love it how small domestic details like that can make a historical place come to life. This walkway led to Margaret's Tower, but I'll return to that later - although before I even knew where I was heading, I was aware of an uneasy feeling of unrest that had nothing to do with the earlier cappuccino...



A 'Seymour wall' - and window, presumably!

Lord Edward Seymour had been knighted by his own father in 1547, but preferred to develop his estates and became a high profile figure in local government. In his lifetime he served in Devon as sheriff and deputy lieutenant, as well as being a considerable landowner.

After his death, his lands passed to his son, another Edward (Sir Edward Seymour, 1st Baronet, c.1563-1613). This Edward was an army colonel, a member of Parliament for Devon and twice High Sheriff of Devon. At the age of 20, he was Deputy Vice Admiral for Devon and in 1586, he was Vice Admiral for Cornwall. Quite a high-flying family - and all before aviation took off!

From about 1600, he spent a large sum of money not only replacing the old house's north range, by a grand staircase and galleries that led to luxurious new rooms in the east range, but also the building of an ambitious north wing, three storeys high. This contained a great hall, staterooms and chambers decorated in alabaster and marble, with a long gallery on the top floor. If he'd been born four hundred years later, he most likely would have been a strong contender for *Grand Designs*.

On the courtyard side, a classical loggia (a gallery forming part of a house with one side open to the garden) was surmounted by a balcony. I found it hard to imagine what this Renaissance style addition would actually have looked like, but I know I'm challenged in that area. However, the fragments and remaining foundations hinted at aspiring grandeur.



Remains of the north wing and loggia

Talking of areas, there were more attempts at grandiosity at the western end, where vast kitchens with more chambers above were built as the beginning of an equally tall west wing, originally planned to extend over the infilled moat at that side of the site - but alas, this wing was abandoned (no more high flying possible).



Vast kitchens in the west wing

The ever-giving audio guide pointed out that this abrupt stop in building was demonstrated not only in a pile of rough bedrock left in situ in front of the loggia, but also the 'toothing' of unfinished building on a west wing wall, awaiting continuation that never materialised. It looked forlornly interesting, even to someone like me, who isn't especially into architecture.

By about 1611, the significant expenditure on his home, as well as supporting his eight children, had led to serious financial difficulties. Sir Edward Seymour, 1st Baronet, died in 1613, only two years after purchasing his baronetcy, with his impressive plans never completed. It would have been a frustrating *Grand Designs* episode. There is a monument to him in Berry Pomeroy Church, which we failed to investigate this time - I find a first visit to a place often results in wanting a second visit to fill in the gaps.



'Toothing' visible on the far left

His son, Sir Edward Seymour, 2nd Baronet (c.1580-1659), was a member of Parliament, Governor of Dartmouth and was knighted in 1603. He made no attempt to complete his father's work, although he lived in style at the castle until the Civil War, when he sided with the Royalists. This was a bad move resulting in his capture and while initially imprisoned in London, the castle was raided by the Parliamentarians. His estates were sequestered by Cromwell, but he was permitted to stay at the castle, where he died in 1659.

His son, another Edward (later 3rd Baronet 1610-1688), was also a Royalist and appointed a colonel in 1642 - and was thereafter generally known as 'Colonel Edward'. In the later part of the Civil War, he was imprisoned in Exeter, but after the Restoration in 1660, things began to look up. He became a deputy lieutenant for Devon, Vice Admiral of Devon and a member of Parliament for Totnes. After his death in 1688, an inventory of the castle was made, showing that the house contained about 50 rooms. However, they were likely to have been in poor repair, due to the vast expenses incurred in the Royalist cause.

His son, yet another Edward, 4th Baronet (1632-1708), was an enthusiastic politician, being Member of Parliament for Exeter and twice Speaker of the House of Commons. He was apparently a staunch Tory and considered very arrogant - I'm saying nothing!

As a young man, this 'Speaker Seymour' had quarrelled with his parents and since his political concerns were in London, he preferred to live in another inherited property at Bradley House in Maiden Bradley, Wiltshire. He had timber beams removed whole from Berry Pomeroy Castle, lead and tiles stripped from roofs, flagstone floors lifted, decorated stonework removed and glass taken from windows. Traitor.

By the end of the 17th century, Berry Pomeroy Castle was thus in a sad state of ruin, which was in no way helped when a significant fire broke out in 1708. It remained the property of the Seymour baronets, who in 1750 succeeded to the family title of Duke of Somerset. In around 1830, some of its crumbling walls were repaired by the Duke of Somerset and although the castle is now managed by English Heritage, it's still owned by the present duke, a direct descendant of the Berry Pomeroy Seymours.

Back in the late 18th century, the picturesque ruins had become the focus of sightseers and artists, as well as the subject of a Gothic novel and later, Victorian romantic novels. There has traditionally been much ghostly speculation that even in current times saw the castle featuring in the television show *Most Haunted* - and it's no surprise that Berry Pomeroy Castle is often considered one of the most haunted castles in Britain.

I have already mentioned a certain frisson of uneasiness as we'd walked along the outside of the Elizabethan house, with the remains of the late 15th century defensive curtain wall to our right. It was a strange feeling to come upon me quite suddenly on such a warm and bright summer's day, but as we arrived at Margaret's Tower and I listened to the friendly audio guide relating its spectral tale, it began to make sense. I now regret taking no photos due to the difficult light conditions, but all the more reason for a second visit...

According to the man in my machine, Eleanor and Margaret Pomeroy were two sisters who lived at the castle. There appear to be scant records, but legend has it that both these sisters loved the same man - always a recipe for disaster - and Eleanor was deeply resentful of the relationship her more attractive sister Margaret had with him.

When Eleanor was left in charge after Lord Pomeroy went on a crusade, her extreme jealousy drove her to chain up Margaret in the castle dungeon for two decades, before leaving her there to starve slowly to death. The ghost of the hideously maltreated Margaret now allegedly rises from the dungeon of Margaret's Tower, exuding a miasma of misery and fear. It's certainly a troublesome case of sibling rivalry.

Another ghostly presence is referred to as the Blue Lady, reportedly dressed in a long blue cape and hood, often attempting to lure visitors to unsafe parts of the castle and thus meet their demise. This disturbed soul is reportedly the daughter of an early Norman lord, who gave birth to a child after an incestuous relationship with her father. Her spirit is said to wander restlessly throughout the castle, grieving for her dead baby, who was strangled to death by one of its parents. The cry of a baby is also often heard...

On that cheerful note, the time came to leave the castle and stop by The Castle Café for an excellent little lunch (since I don't like big lunches). As I sat once more looking across at the castle, I felt I really should have taken at least one photo of Margaret's Tower, so before we left, I did my best from the outside. It seems rather fitting that the tower itself is lurking in the shadows beside the Elizabethan building standing boldly in the sunlight. Poor Margaret...



Margaret's Tower lurking in shadows on the right