

FARLEIGH HUNGERFORD CASTLE

Farleigh Hungerford, Somerset BA2 7RS

12th September 2017

It was no good, I kept thinking of Charlie Hungerford in *Bergerac* when I first learned of the existence of Farleigh Hungerford Castle - and then Charley Farley (sidekick of Piggy Malone from *The Two Ronnies*) kept springing to mind. This castle had to be visited!

At around 10:15 on the allotted day, we were second to arrive at the English Heritage site and emerged from the car into a cool morning that was blessedly warm when standing in sunlight. The concessionary entrance fee was £4.70 each, which gave us an audio guide around the castle via a hand-held gadget. It allowed us to wander freely at our own pace, learning interesting snippets about the Hungerford family, while pausing to take photos. It was great! I even replayed a few parts and there was an option of hearing extra details if desired. Sometimes I desired and sometimes I didn't, it was that kind of morning.



The gatehouse

Situated on the current Somerset border with Wiltshire, Farleigh was just a small settlement at the time of the Norman invasion. It was acquired by the Montfort family, who built the original manor house, but in 1369 it was sold to Thomas Hungerford (?-1397) who hailed from a prominent Wiltshire family. Sir Thomas Hungerford, knighted in 1375, had made his fortune working as steward to John of Gaunt, 1st Duke of Lancaster. He was three times a member of Parliament for Wiltshire and was the first person to be recorded in the rolls of Parliament as Speaker in the House of Commons (although the role existed before his term of office).

Apart from his speaking activities, Sir Thomas set about building the inner court of the castle in a quadrangular design between 1377 and 1383. Round towers were built on each corner, with the gatehouse in the centre of the southern curtain wall. Rather than being a defensive structure, it was intended as a luxurious residence - Sir Thomas had a reputation to protect. He couldn't have been immensely popular, though, as a park that was attached to the castle necessitated the destruction of most of the local village of Wittenham. Nearly a whole village!

After his death in 1397, his son Walter Hungerford (1378-1449) continued to extend the castle with an additional outer court, enclosing the parish church in the process. He was knighted on the accession of King Henry IV (son of John of Gaunt) in 1399, and was active in the royal armies of both King Henry IV and King Henry V. This included taking part in the campaign that culminated in the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 and subsequently the king's triumphs in France.

He was created Knight of the Garter, which is an order of chivalry founded by King Edward III in 1348 - and not to be confused in any way with a night of the garter. After the death of King Henry V in 1422, Sir Walter, 1st Baron Hungerford, was appointed a guardian of the infant king Henry VI, thus becoming a person of significant power. He also served as Treasurer of England from 1426 to 1432. By the time of his death, he was a very rich man indeed, owning 100+ manors and other estates, mainly in the west of England.

He was also clearly an ambitious man, so what with his father's destruction of a village and his own requisition of the parish church, one wonders at the ruthlessness of the Hungerfords? In Walter's defence, he improved the castle chapel and built a house for the priests who served in it. A replacement church for the village was also built, but I'm still not convinced...



Requisitioned parish church within the castle walls

Walter's son Robert, 2nd Baron Hungerford (1409-1459), was therefore heir to a large fortune, but the Hundred Years' War severely depleted the coffers. Robert also had to raise a hefty ransom for the release of his son after his capture at the Battle of Castillon (1453).

As a point of interest, the Hundred Years War was actually a series of conflicts between 1337 and 1453 and so by rights should have been dubbed the Hundred and Sixteen Years' War - but I must admit it doesn't have the same ring to it. The Plantagenet rulers of England and the French House of Valois were fighting over the right to rule the Kingdom of France and I'm no expert in these matters, but could it possibly have stemmed from the Norman conquest of England in 1066?

Simplistic wonderings aside, Robert the 2nd Baron was succeeded by his previously ransomed son Robert, 3rd Baron Hungerford (1431-1464). The Hungerfords had remained loyal to the Lancastrians and this particular Robert was very active in his allegiance, taking a leading part. At one point, he was entrusted with custody of the Tower of London, but failed to hold it against a Yorkist attack. After a certain amount of fleeing and successive defeats on the battlefield, he took part in the Battle of Towton in 1461, where the Lancastrians were again defeated.

He then fled to Scotland, continuing to support the Lancastrian cause, but was attainted in Edward IV's first parliament in November 1461 - which I've only fairly recently learned meant a judgement of death had been passed on him. Give him credit, he continued his quest by attempting to rally Lancastrians in the north of England, but was taken prisoner at the Battle of Hexham in 1464 and executed at Newcastle. At his own request (before death, obviously), he was buried at Salisbury Cathedral.

His eldest son, Sir Thomas Hungerford (c.1439-1469) was more of a turncoat than his father and firstly gave support to Edward IV and the Yorkists. He then later joined the conspiracy to restore Henry VI, but it was a bad move, as he was attainted and executed at Salisbury. Although he had lived mainly at Rowden, near Chippenham in Wiltshire, he was buried in the chapel at Farleigh Hungerford Castle.

The property had been seized by the Crown and granted to Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who was later to become King Richard III. The brother of Sir Thomas Hungerford however, namely Sir Walter Hungerford II (c.1441-1516), managed to obtain a general pardon from Richard III on the king's accession in 1483.

He still managed to be arrested, but escaped from custody and covered himself with glory at the Battle of Bosworth, where he was knighted on the battlefield by the victorious Henry Tudor, King Henry VII. This meant the recovery of Farleigh Hungerford Castle to the family and more general success, including being made a member of the Privy Council, which was a body of advisers to the king.

After his death, he was succeeded by his son, Sir Edward Hungerford (?-1522), who rebuilt the gatehouse. Edward was a soldier and courtier in the court of King Henry VIII, but notoriety surrounded his second wife, Agnes Cotell. What I had retained of all the previous history from the obliging audio guide, I'm not entirely sure, but my interest was definitely sparked by a tale of murder as I stood and gazed at the kitchen area.



The scene of dubious kitchen activities

Agnes Cotell had done away with her first husband, who had been a steward to Sir Edward. Presumably in his own interests, Sir Edward protected Agnes from punishment until his death in 1522. However, during a trial in 1523, it emerged that Agnes had throttled her husband to death with the help of two servants and disposed of his body in the kitchen furnace. It must have smelt! Just desserts were served when all three involved were hanged at Tyburn.

Walter Hungerford III (1503-1540) also left a legacy of controversy. He was a man of powerful influence and became a close ally of Thomas Cromwell, chief minister of King Henry VIII. He was also a man of apparent abusive cruelty and locked his third wife Elizabeth Hussey in one of the castle's towers for nearly four years.

A letter from Elizabeth smuggled out to Cromwell described how she had been imprisoned under the custody of Sir Walter's chaplain, who had not only starved her, but had more than once attempted to poison her. She had survived by drinking her own urine and eating food secretly supplied by local women. Elizabeth asked Cromwell to bring divorce proceedings against Sir Walter, possibly alluding to his homosexual activity.

In 1533, Henry VIII's government had introduced the "Acte for the punishment of the vice of Buggerie" (which remained a capital offence until 1861). Cromwell ignored Elizabeth's letter, but when Cromwell fell from grace himself in 1540, the Privy Council began to investigate Sir Walter's treatment of Elizabeth.

When Thomas Cromwell was executed at Tower Hill on 28th July 1540, Sir Walter was beheaded alongside him. He was found guilty of the aforementioned "Acte"; of employing a priest who had denounced the king as a heretic; and employing a 'witch' to predict when the king would die. The heads of Thomas Cromwell and Walter Hungerford were mounted on spikes and displayed on London Bridge. Gory.



The infamous 'Lady Tower'

As for Farleigh Hungerford Castle, it again reverted to the Crown until it was repurchased by the Hungerford family in 1554. Sir Walter Hungerford IV (1532-1597), son of Walter Hungerford III, was known as the 'Knight of Farleigh' because of his mastery at field sports. He and his brother Sir Edward Hungerford II (?-1607) updated and improved the property, as did his great-nephew and heir, Sir Edward Hungerford III (1596-1648). To be honest, I was becoming a little Hungerforded-out, but the end was nigh. Kind of.

Sir Edward III declared for Parliament and commanded local forces in the Civil War (1642-1646). He successfully led his troops at the siege of nearby Wardour Castle in 1643, but then ignominiously lost Farleigh Hungerford Castle to forces led by his own Royalist half-brother, Colonel John Hungerford. After a few skirmishes, it was regained in 1645 for Sir Edward, who died there in 1648 and is commemorated by an ostentatious tomb chest with effigies of himself and his wife Margaret.

When Sir Edward III died, his half-brother Anthony (1608-1657) inherited the castle, passing it on to his son, Sir Edward Hungerford IV (1632-1711), along with a considerable fortune. This Sir Edward, though, managed to live such an extravagant lifestyle that he ran up massive debts, which finally forced him to sell the castle in 1686. By the 18th century, it had fallen into disrepair, although it naturally retained its interest to tourists and historians. In 1915 it was sold to the Office of Works, when a restoration programme began, before it passed into the ownership of English Heritage.



A most fascinating slice of English history!

Phew! Despite all the Hungerford happenings, the most meaningful discovery to me was hearing that Margaret Plantagenet had been born at Farleigh Hungerford Castle in 1473. My later-life interest in history was paying off, as I knew she was the unlucky soul who had married Sir Richard Pole, whose mother was half-sister of Margaret Beaufort, the ambitiously driven mother of Henry VII.

Margaret Plantagenet managed to manoeuvre herself and her sons through various tricky royal situations over many years after she was widowed, while her favour at court varied. She was finally executed at age 68, purely because she was a Plantagenet and perceived as a danger to the Tudor throne. Her executioner was a novice, who made a right royal hash of the job - which certainly gives rise to some horrendous images.

Perhaps the most unexpected discovery of the entire visit was the area containing the priest's house, the chapel and the crypt. We first explored the priest's house that had been built in 1430 for the chantry priest. It had later become a dairy and then a farmhouse, but nowadays houses a creditable exhibition of the castle's history. For me, the most memorable exhibit was a rare bible of 1611 that sported a spelling mistake. There was also a collection of clay pipes, which for some reason always fascinate me 😊

We next entered the chapel of St Leonard, not knowing what a rare sight we'd encounter. It had been built at the same time as the castle and yet was still intact. It felt like walking into history, as our feet took us past what looked like a bier for resting coffins, a plain font, an old pew and an old wooden structure, to the window wall.



The amazing chapel of St Leonard

To the right of the window was a wonderful and well-preserved wall painting of St George slaying his mythical dragon. It has been dated to the 1440s, due to the style of armour worn by St George and had almost certainly been commissioned by Sir Walter, 1st Baron Hungerford. Another very faded painting depicted a smaller figure of a kneeling knight wearing the Hungerford arms and therefore supposed to be Sir Walter Hungerford himself, kneeling in devotion to the saint.

The paintings had been rediscovered in 1844, but attempts to preserve them during 1931 and 1955 probably did more harm than good. They were treated with hot wax, but the red of the wax stained the pale background and caused considerable damage. The wax was removed in the 1970s, but the redness remains. Red or not, I was very impressed and took some time trying to take a worthy photo. A few other people came to look around the chapel, but we were able to take our time.



15th century St George

The small adjoining north chapel dedicated to St Anne was also a well-preserved marvel, containing memorials from large, ornate tombs with effigies still retaining traces of original paintwork and medieval wrought iron railings, to painted family crests on the walls. The Hungerford family certainly had a sense of their own importance, but the whole effect was quite mesmerising. Perhaps the most outstanding was the lavish 17th century marble monument to Sir Edward Hungerford III and his wife Lady Margaret - although I particularly liked the shabby chic corner below:



Ornate memorials

Beneath the chapel and reached by a steep outside stair, the 17th century burial crypt was small but intriguing. We peered through some bars at a collection of lead anthropoid (human-shaped) coffins, which are said to be the finest collection of such coffins in Britain. They still contain the embalmed bodies, pickled in spirit, of presumed members of the Hungerford family - four men, two women and two children. Four of the adult coffins had moulded faces, perhaps based on death masks cast from the faces of their occupants.

However, the audio guide had a much gorier tale to relate than mere human shaped coffins and death masks. It stemmed from around the 1830s, when Farleigh Hungerford Castle had become a regular destination for travellers - including in 1846, the future Emperor of France, Napoleon III. For bold seekers of new experiences, who obviously had no qualms about putting their lives at risk, holes were drilled into the lead of the coffins and some of the corpse-infused spirit was offered to them to taste. Ideas of health and safety have most certainly changed since then!



Site of past macabre practices

As we emerged from the dankness below to the living world above, we saw the earlier fluffy white clouds had begun to turn into the grey variety, so we'd enjoyed the best of the morning. It was technically now the afternoon and I'd been so taken up with all the tales of historic derring-do, that I'd hardly noticed I'd missed out on the daily cappuccino. Farleigh Hungerford had been a truly fascinating place to visit, steeped in crime, chivalry, mystery and embalming fluid. Even Charley Farley might have fitted in quite well!