

OKEHAMPTON CASTLE

Okehampton, Devon EX20 1JA

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I can remember visiting Okehampton Castle several decades ago, but my only lasting memory was a visual one of the keep's distinctive silhouette. Today's second visit immediately verified the impact of the castle's remains, in their picturesque setting above the River Okemont. Occupying an impressively defensive position in the centre of a steeply sloped valley, the northern side of the castle would have been protected by the river, with its other approaches deliberately kept waterlogged. An outer curtain wall, surrounding the high motte on which the stone keep resided, would have added to the formidable obstacles facing any attackers.



Approaching the castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

As it happened, there are no records of any sieges or battles and little is known of the castle's original life. Dating back to early Norman times, historical records of its construction are lacking, although it appears in the Domesday Book of 1086, when it was owned by Baldwin de Brionne (1022-1090). I love that name! It packs a punch all on its own, although Baldwin de Brionne must have been a man of some standing, being 1st Lord of Okehampton and Sheriff of Devonshire. He was also one of 52 Devon tenants-in-chief mentioned in the Domesday Book.

The castle had been built following a revolt in Devon against Norman rule and was positioned to protect a prime route from Devon into Cornwall, which included a crossing point across the West Okemont River. Another function was to control the existing settlement of Ocmundtune - which is a glorious name meaning 'settlement by the Ockment'. It was recorded as a place where slaves could be freed at crossroads, which is rather an uplifting thought.

The castle itself was run on a castle-guard system, which was a feudal arrangement whereby lands were given to Baldwin de Brionne's tenants, in exchange for them contributing to the castle's garrison. Baldwin also founded a new town close to the castle, complete with a mill and a market, which gradually gained prominence over the old settlement and ultimately became known as Okehampton.

However, first things first and apart from our first 'free' entry after becoming English Heritage members, this meant a cup of steaming hot black coffee, which we drank on a wooden bench while looking up at the castle remains and wondering if we were the only ones there. We weren't, as a lone male photographer of advancing years wandered down from the ruins and spent ten minutes or so telling us about his travels, his arthritis and his photos.

This made us eager to start our own investigations, which firstly meant ascending some steps from the barbican to the gatehouse (where a guardroom had once existed on the first floor) and where the audio tour began in earnest. At this point, other visitors arrived and seemed to proceed more quickly than we did. I blame the compulsive taking of photographs - and on noticing a gap in the unstable clouds, Alan stopped to take a not half bad photo from between the great hall and the lodgings:



Between the great hall and the lodgings (photo by Alan Santillo)

Back to the history - and after the aforementioned Baldwin de Brionne's death in 1090, the castle was inherited by his daughter Adeliza. However, knowledge of this time is obscure and there is no evidence of Okehampton Castle being involved in the Stephen and Matilda conflict of 1139 to 1153, known as The Anarchy. In 1173, the castle was passed in marriage to Renaud de Courtenay (1125-1194) and thereafter to his son Robert (c. 1172-1242), who married the daughter of William de Redvers, Earl of Devon.

The castle at the end of the 12th century was still considered to be of military use, as it was requisitioned by King Richard I in 1193-1194, to aid in the royal defence of Devon. It remained a fortification until the late 13th century, when the de Courtenay family became Earls of Devon. Robert was followed by his son John (c. 1224-1274), but by the time John's son Hugh (1251-1292) had inherited the castle, it was described as comprising only an old motte, a hall, chamber and a poorly built kitchen. Estate agent listing skills obviously weren't yet in practice!

Hugh and later his son, another Hugh (1276-1340, 1st Earl of Devon), set about re-developing the castle as a hunting lodge, creating a large deer park to replace older, unenclosed hunting grounds. This meant clearing away older settlements around the castle, as well as abandoning pastures and fields. It appears the march of progress is rarely achieved without losses? Once the deer park was established, fallow deer, wild boar and hares were hunted, while large ponds in the park were used to supply fish. I don't suppose they had chips, though - and French fries would have been a real political hot potato.

As well as the deer park, the castle's accommodation and facilities were significantly upgraded and the extensive building work turned it into a luxurious and fashionable residence overlooking the luscious green landscape - rooms with a green and pleasant view. Despite that, the main residence of Hugh de Courtenay, 1st Earl of Devon, was at Tiverton, about 30 miles away. Okehampton was probably visited only a few times a year to hunt and for special occasions, but when in residence, the castle would have been full of people.



The great hall (photo by Alan Santillo)

The property passed on in due course to Edward de Courtenay, 3rd Earl of Devon (c.1357-1419) and according to one of English Heritage's information boards, his household when at the castle in 1384 numbered 135 people - 61 servants, 41 esquires, 14 lawyers, 8 knights, 8 clergyman and 3 damsels. The main purpose of this entourage was to serve the lord and convey prestige. When not in residence, the castle would consist only of a small permanent garrison, with a constable, a gate-keeper and a few men-at-arms.

However, the Wars of the Roses (1455-1485) brought conflict to Okehampton. Thomas de Courtenay, 5th Earl of Devon (1414-1458) seemed caught between loyalties, but was one of the Lancastrian commanders at the First Battle of St Albans in 1455, where he was wounded. He was said to have aided reconciliation between the two sides, but then suddenly died.

The Wars of the Roses continued to wreak havoc, leading to the deaths and executions of his three sons, Thomas, Henry and John. Yorkist King Edward IV confiscated Okehampton Castle, which was later returned to the family by Lancastrian King Henry VI, but after the battle of Tewkesbury in 1471, the castle and earldom was once again confiscated. However, when King Henry VII took the throne in 1485, the earldom was revived for Edward Courtenay (?-1509), who was the senior surviving descendant of the previous Courtenay earls.

There was trouble ahead, as Edward's son William (1475-1511) was attainted and imprisoned in the Tower of London by King Henry VII for conspiracy, but was pardoned and restored by King Henry VIII. He took part in Henry VIII's coronation in 1509, but then died of pleurisy.

His son Henry (c.1498-1539) became a gentleman of the privy chamber to King Henry VIII, and also a close friend. In 1525 he was made constable of Windsor Castle and later that year was created Marquess of Exeter. However, the king became concerned about the Courtenay family for complex political reasons, including their secret support of Catherine of Aragon.

In late 1538, the king and Thomas Cromwell took action and Henry Courtenay and his family were sent to the Tower of London. Henry was found guilty of treason and was executed on Tower Hill, by decapitation with a sword. All the Courtenay properties were taken by the king. Thus the link between Okehampton Castle and the Courtenays was permanently broken and the castle was abandoned, with the deer park being rented out by the Crown.

Despite this, ownership of the castle still had worth, with the right to appoint Okehampton's two members of Parliament from 1623 onwards. In the late 17th century, a bakehouse was established in the castle, but during the 18th century, the deer park reverted to farmland.



Kitchen in front of the keep (photo by Alan Santillo)

Over the years, the castle unsurprisingly became a subject for landscape artists, including J M W Turner, with its distinctive silhouette against the sky. What I found personally interesting, though, was the fact that during the 19th century, some minor repairs were carried out by Sir Vyell Vyvyan, an ancestor of the Vivian family in my own family tree.

In the early 20th century, the castle was bought by a local man named Sydney Simmons, who helpfully cleared away much of the vegetation and carried out some repairs to the stonework. It was passed to the Okehampton Castle Trust in 1917 and then 50 years later to the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works, who subsequently undertook extensive restoration work. Finally, its care passed to English Heritage, whose hot black coffee was still keeping me warm as we investigated the great hall, buttery and kitchens.



Remains of oven built into the motte

Above the buttery, there would have been a solar, designed as the family's private living and sleeping quarters, but the great hall was easier to imagine as it would have been, lit by a large, decorative window and partitioned from the buttery and kitchen by a wooden screen. As the social centre of the castle, images of lavish feasts with an open hearth and high table sprang readily to mind, although the great hall was also the business centre of the castle.

After this area, the audio guide directed us onward and upward to the motte, predominantly made on a natural rock outcrop and strengthened with earth from the construction of the castle ditches. It stands at 105 ft/32 metres high and the steps up to the keep were plentiful - but on the plus side, it afforded a really good view of the buildings below.



View of mainly the south side

The keep was first built in the 11th century, with massive stone walls at least one storey high, before being redeveloped in the 14th century as a two-storey structure with a rectangular addition on the western side. There were lodgings on the upper floor and a tall turret with a staircase - the remains of the very same turret that first hit you in the eye from a distance, with its current erratic shape.



The tall turret (photo by Alan Santillo)

The audio guide led us around the perimeter of the keep, which I found ever so slightly unnerving, with its sheer drop below. There were great views of the surrounding countryside in all its greenness and it was easy to imagine the deer park of yesteryear, but I have to say I would be very reluctant to bring any grandchildren along with me to the top (although they would, of course, be perfectly safe if acting sensibly!?)

They would probably have been interested in the outlet of the garderobe in the south-west wall. A garderobe was originally a room used for keeping safe valuable clothes and possessions (from the French 'garder' to keep and 'robe' as in clothes), but later meant a privy, or toilet. If the privy chute spilt its contents onto the motte, the mess would have been cleaned up by unfortunate people known as gong farmers. I've no idea why that title sounds so dubious...



Medieval plumbing...

It was fascinating to see the remains of the turret from its inner angle, so to speak. Although it didn't seem as high from standing at the same level as its base, rather than gazing at it from down below or from a distance, it was still impressive. It's frankly impressive that it's remained standing for centuries, despite the ravages of the Devonshire weather!

It was time to descend and the clouds were beginning to look surly (perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned the Devonshire weather). In fact, as we reached ground level and approached the western lodgings and the chapel, the rain fell. It was becoming a problem for photography, so we took refuge from the encroaching drips and drops as best we could inside the chapel.

The chapel proved to be an interesting shelter with more area of surviving walls, some still showing plaster and some topped with crenellations. Originally, it would have been decorated with wall paintings. The piscina in the southern wall was in good condition and the view from the window was very rural, bringing to mind wet days spent at the castle in medieval times.



Chapel wall with inset piscina on the left

Next to the chapel was the priest's lodgings, which would have been small but equipped with an upstairs fireplace and window, as well as a downstairs garderobe. We had ventured forth when the rain had mostly abated, but although the audio guide talked about a bakery located to the south of the western lodgings nearby and the floor of the oven being made from an old millstone, neither of us were sure what we were looking at ... or not.

At the other side of the chapel were the eastern lodgings, which would have provided accommodation for guests and servants - the latter would probably have lived on the lower floor, while guests would have occupied the more salubrious top floor. The audio guide seemed keen to bring a well-preserved garderobe to our attention in the furthest lodging, where additionally a hand basin was still embedded in the wall on the upper floor.

I dutifully took photos of the highly prized plumbing, standing in the dank room and wondering if any ghosts were supposed to be associated with the castle. Later research revealed a fanciful tale about a certain Lady Howard, a headless horseman pulling a carriage made of her four husbands' human bones, a black dog and grass being plucked from the castle mound one blade at a time. There are ghost stories and there are ghost fantasies - this is the latter!

It was time to depart, with the feeling that a further visit was needed on a fine day in springtime, when we could take advantage of the riverside picnic area and appreciate the wildflowers said to adorn the meadow, woodland and motte. It would be good also to enjoy the nearby woodland walks and imagine those who had lived within the old stones of the castle and walked or hunted in those woods in centuries gone by.



Old stones!