

RESTORMEL CASTLE

Lostwithiel, Cornwall PL22 0EE

6th July 2018

I could remember visiting Restormel Castle around 30 years ago when our children were small, although not too small to enjoy a bit of castle clambering. Safely, of course. Today we had come to the momentous decision that we would join English Heritage - but before that, we stopped at the renowned Duchy of Cornwall Nursery for a cappuccino and a piece of cake. It was a happy half hour for us, sitting outside and looking across to where the castle lay peacefully ensconced in the faraway fields. I wasn't quite as peaceful, due to several inquisitive and importunate birds seeking crumbs, but that's of no historical importance.

Our subsequent arrival at the castle coincided with a group of exiting schoolchildren, which to my mind is the best variety of schoolchildren - but I say that a little flippantly, as it's brilliant to take children to castles and talk about ramparts, drawbridges, portcullises and the like. Just maybe not when I'm there, that's all ☺ Actually, the teacher in charge was excellent at keeping them in order and quieting their raucous noise, although it was with relief that we saw them make their way down the path and towards their school bus.

We entered the small ticket office cum shop, where we nearly had our eardrums burst by a most extraordinary noise from two dogs (out of three) belonging to two other visitors looking around the shop. It was actually impossible to think straight, let alone concentrate on English Heritage membership, but the clear-thinking English Heritage employee very astutely gave us some literature and suggested we read it while waiting outside - until the manic dogs had left.



Restormel Castle awaits... (photo by Alan Santillo)

Again, this is of no historical importance, but we were so grateful for the understanding. We even walked up closer to the castle itself to take photos while nobody was around, before returning to the ticket office to join the English Heritage club, so to speak. We were then free to explore and walked up to the castle again, ready to see what it had to offer. First of all, though, we took advantage of a bench under a tree, on which to eat our packed lunch and feel part of the historic surroundings of the Cornish countryside.

Restormel Castle - or to use its proper Cornish name, Kastel Rostormel - is one of the four chief Norman castles of Cornwall (the others being Launceston, Tintagel and Trematon). It's an unusually well-preserved example of a circular shell keep, a type of fortification built during a short time span in the 12th and 13th centuries. Of only 71 examples known in England and Wales, Restormel Castle is the most intact. Respect!

These castles were medieval conversions of the earlier wooden motte and bailey ones, built by replacing the external palisade with a stone wall. The internal bailey was then filled with domestic stone buildings clustered around the inside of the wall, thus forming a defensive bailey. At Restormel, the domestic buildings include a hall, kitchen, solar, guest chambers and an ante-chapel (the area before the chapel). An anti-chapel would have been ill-advised.



Side view of the enticing gateway

We eventually approached the entrance of this particular medieval conversion through the square(ish) gatehouse, which formerly had two sets of gates and still seemed to echo a rather masculine historical presence, despite its fairly ruinous state. It was possibly the first part of the original castle to have been partially built in stone and had once unsurprisingly possessed a portcullis and drawbridge.



Square gateway to the circular keep

It originally stood at three storeys high, with mention of guardhouses to each side of the gate tower and rooms above. However, it was partly dismantled, probably during the Civil War when the castle saw some action. Nowadays, the castle still stands at its full height with a wall walk at 7.6 metres/25 feet. The whole of it sits on top of a natural rock mound, surrounded by a sizeable bank and flat-bottomed ditch, which apparently was always a dry one. Except perhaps in heavy rain?

Upon stepping inside the circular keep, I gazed around curiously at the various sections that had been constructed from local quarried slate, with window and doorway arches of dressed white stone from Pentewan (about 16 kilometres/10 miles away). The remains of different rooms were clearly identifiable, although to my not particularly building-astute eyes, I tended to see just a mass of stonework, windows and walls. Speaking of the walls, they were impressive as castle walls so often are, measuring 38 metres/125 feet in diameter and up to 2.4 metres/7.9 feet thick.

Maybe it was the hot weather, but I was feeling a little thick myself! I was finding it really quite difficult to grasp hold of the time-scale of construction and noticed that even the information boards contained a fair amount of "probably", "possible", "alternatively", "perhaps" and "may have" instances. It's not a complaint, as without vital records, there's only really intelligent conjecture to fall back upon. Having said that, the boards themselves could have used an update...



An overview of the keep (photo by Alan Santillo)

As ever, some post-visit history has unearthed a great deal. Restormel was part of the fiefdom of the Norman magnate Robert, Count of Mortain/Morteyne, but although no mention of a castle appears in the Domesday Book, it's likely that the motte and bailey castle was built at Restormel no later than 1090. After a rebellion centred on Exeter in 1068, a general uprising in Devon and Cornwall had followed in 1069. These events would have influenced a decision to build a castle to control a strategic crossing point of the River Fowey.

The castle's construction would have been undertaken by the local sheriff, Baldwin Fitz Turstin, which is a name and a half! It was constructed in the middle of a large deer park, so may originally have been intended for use as a hunting lodge as well as a fortification - nothing wrong with a bit of dual-purpose architecture. The descendants of Baldwin Fitz Turtin then continued to hold the fortified manor as tenants and vassals of the Earls of Cornwall for almost 200 years.

All this had taken place before the development of Lostwithiel, the name of which derives from the old Cornish name of 'Lostgwydeyel' and is believed to mean 'the place at the tail of the forest'. It had been documented in the charter of 1189, just before Robert de Cardinham was lord of the manor, between 1192 and 1225. Known as a great landowner, Robert built up the inner curtain walls and converted the gatehouse completely to stone, thus giving the castle its current design. The castle continued to belong to the Cardinham family for several years and was used in preference to their older castle at Old Cardinham. Out with the old, in with the new?

Descendant Isolda de Cardinham married Thomas de Tracey, who then owned the castle until 1264, when it was seized by Simon de Montfort, 6th Earl of Leicester, during the civil conflicts in the reign of King Henry III. It was then seized back in 1265 by the former High Sheriff of Cornwall, Sir Ralph Arundell. Good for him! After some persuasion, the castle was surrendered to King Henry III's brother, Richard of Cornwall, in 1270. When he died in 1261, his son Edmund, 2nd Earl of Cornwall, made Restormel his main administrative base, from where he oversaw the profitable tin mines in the village of Lostwithiel.

He set about transforming the functional castle into a veritable palace by adding the unusual curving rooms inside the curtain wall. All the main chambers were built on top of storage cellars, with the small ante-chapel giving access to the chapel that projected through the curtain wall. Water from a natural spring was piped under pressure into the castle buildings, which must have been regarded as a modern convenience of the era. He was also fond of the now thriving town of Lostwithiel, calling it his "Lily of the Valley" and "Fairest of Small Cities".

Earl Edmund died in 1299 without an heir and Restormel reverted to the Crown, more or less losing its importance and its excellent state of prestigious upkeep. In 1337, King Edward III created the Duchy of Cornwall for his son and heir, Prince Edward, who inherited Restormel Castle and its land. Edward, known as the Black Prince (possibly after wearing black armour at the Battle of Crécy in 1346), held court at Restormel during several visits in the mid-14th century and effected expensive repairs, including the establishment of a deer park in the castle ground.

Throughout the 14th century, Lostwithiel was the capital of Cornwall and known as "The Port of Fawi" - but during this time, the river began to silt up because of the tin waste flowing from Bodmin Moor. It gradually became unnavigable to sea-going vessels and as the port of Lostwithiel declined, so did the importance of Restormel Castle. It was neglected for nearly three centuries after the death of the Black Prince in 1376, becoming an ivy-covered ruin that had been extensively plundered for its stone.



Ruinous, but no longer covered in ivy

Despite its ruinous condition, however, it certainly came in handy during the Civil War. The Parliamentary commander Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, invaded the south-west in the summer of 1644, intending to take Lyme (now Lyme Regis) and Plymouth, both of which were under siege by Royalists. The south-west was largely controlled by Royalists and Devereux wanted to sever the flow of Cornish tin and copper that was helping to fund the King's cause.

His mission failed and he was prevented from making a mainland retreat by an army headed by King Charles I. He fell back to Lostwithiel and Restormel Castle with the hope of escaping to sea via Fowey, but the castle was stormed by a Royalist force led by Sir Richard Grenville, member of Parliament for Fowey before the war.

The castle remained in Royalist hands until their cause was lost the following year, when Parliamentary forces began an assault on the south-west. Restormel Castle was evacuated and abandoned, deemed too badly ruined to be repaired and too worthless to be demolished - which was both a bad and a good result. Poor old Restormel!

By the 19th century, it was a popular attraction for visitors, including Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in 1846 and the future King Edward VII in 1865. The castle had remained the property of the Princes of Wales and still belongs to the Duchy of Cornwall, although its care was passed to the Ministry of Works in 1925 and since 1984, it has been administered by English Heritage. It has never been formally excavated - what? Madness!



Steps leading up to the wall-walk

Something that had to be done was to climb up to the wall-walk and ... walk along the wall. There was naturally a good view from such a height, both of the castle and the countryside. It was easier to understand about the rooms at this level, including the great hall and the chapel. What was once the east wall of the chapel had been filled in during the Civil War. Timber supports had been placed into this and a gun platform erected to support cannon. Needs must, I suppose, but it does seem suspiciously like sacrilege.



Once the east window of the chapel

We didn't linger too long up aloft, as it was uncomfortably hot and there was more shade to be found below. In the courtyard were the remains of the circular well in a chamber 8 metres/26.2 feet deep. The well is thought possibly to date from the 12th century, since part of the keep was built over it. I often feel vaguely apprehensive looking down wells, as they can be so deep!

I always wish I'd researched places before visiting them and this castle was no exception. It must have been a significant place that was later quite a spectacle in the days of the Black Prince. It's easier now to imagine it throughout the centuries, with its bailey, great hall and other rooms in use. Looking out at the surrounding countryside, it doesn't seem too much a stretch of the imagination to picture 300 deer roaming amongst the Cornish landscape...



Goodbye Restormel Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)