

## TREMATON CASTLE

Castle Hill, Saltash, Cornwall PL12 4QW

### 7<sup>th</sup> July 1984 – and from a distance ever since

As the proverbial crow flies, we live about one mile from Trematon Castle. When we go out walking in the nearby nature reserve, it pops up all over the place in views and subsequent photos. It is tantalising in the extreme! We once visited the site when the grounds were open for some sort of summer fête, but my interest in castles was not what it is nowadays. The memory is dim and the one photo is faded – but something is better than nothing. Possibly.



**Memento of a hot afternoon at Trematon Castle**

My desire is to return one day, but it currently appears that we have missed our chance. For several years, the castle grounds have been open to the public as a garden, but now this seems to have changed. Owned by the Duchy of Cornwall, it has been leased out on a long-term basis to private tenants. My abiding hope is that one day soon it will end up under the auspices of English Heritage, who will revere and maintain it as the unique piece of history it is.

Meanwhile, I am contenting myself with researching its history amid the numerous photos taken from the aforementioned nature reserve walks over the years. Like so many castles, the one at Trematon was first raised as a motte and bailey fortification in the wake of the Norman Conquest. Two years later in 1068, William the Conqueror travelled to Devon and Cornwall to deal with an uprising against the French incomers and ordered castles to be built, with the four chief Norman castles of Cornwall being Launceston, Restormel, Tintagel and Trematon.

In the Anglo-Saxon period up until the Norman Conquest, Trematon Manor had covered around 7,000 acres, including the current St Stephens, Saltash, Botus Fleming and part of Pillaton. The manor's administrative centre was the village of Trematon and therefore, along with its obvious topographical advantages, it was a good place to build a castle for several reasons.

One of its foremost purposes was to enable the Normans to control movements along the River Lynher, which connected St Germans (at that time Cornwall's second most important town and originally the seat of the bishop of Cornwall) to Plymouth Sound and out into the English Channel. Rather than build the castle directly over St Germans, a natural hillock further to the east was chosen, 1½ miles away from the village of Trematon itself, which would also oversee the Saltash to St Budeaux ferry.

This ferry operated on the River Tamar, which was a natural barrier effectively disconnecting Cornwall from the mainland. The only other easy access into the county was 17 miles further north to a fording point at Launceston. Trematon Castle thus controlled the ferry and also gained income from it, with finance being an important factor as always. Nowadays, of course, the Tamar Bridge exists.

By about 1070, the motte and bailey castle had been raised on the extreme point of the chosen promontory. The motte is thought to be rock-core overlaid with earth to make it the required shape and precipitous on three sides. It would have been topped by timber palisades and probably a wooden tower, with a ditch running around the base. The bailey towards the south enclosed approximately one acre and would have been protected by a rampart and a ditch. On many local walks in different seasons, we espied the enigmatic fortress:



**A lingering presence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

It appeared in the Domesday Book of 1086, rather charmingly and with a musical nuance, as the manor of "Tremetone". Also recorded is that Robert, Count of Mortain (William the Conqueror's half-brother), had been given most of Cornwall, including Trematon, where Reginald de Valletort/Vautort was his tenant.

It's thought that Count Robert established a weekly market next to the castle and either Count Robert or Reginald de Valletort founded a borough of Trematon, adjacent to the castle and the market. At that time, the borough and market needed the protection the castle provided, but by the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the castle was owned by a later de Valletort, who founded the new borough of Saltash as a better site for trade. The borough of Trematon, however, lingered in name, if not much else, until the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The feudal barony of Trematon (or Honour of Trematon) was one of the three feudal baronies in Cornwall existing in medieval times, the others being Launceston and Cardinham. The barony of Trematon was unusual, because unlike most English feudal baronies it was not held directly from royalty, but from the descendants of Robert, Count of Mortain.

In the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, the oval shell keep was rebuilt in stone on its earlier motte. The walls of the keep were a very reasonable 10 feet/3 metres thick and still stand today at 30 feet/9.1 metres high, while the internal diameter measures around 69 feet/21 metres. Practical lean-to buildings would most likely have been built against its internal wall. It must have been an interesting structure.

The tower is battlemented and was once roofed in, with divisions into residential storeys. Some patchy plaster survives, while beam-holes are visible on the inside and corbels at the top. Intended to support woodwork, it was adapted like most castles of that era for domestic use as well as military. In the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, the earth and timber defences around the bailey were also upgraded to stone.

Together with a hall and other buildings, a rectangular gatehouse was built within the castle bailey in 1270, with two floors and a double system of portcullises. Although it now has a modern roof, it is mostly complete. Its claim to fame is that Edward the Black Prince (1330-76) spent a night in its upper chamber. Folklore has it that Trematon Castle was one of his favoured homes in which he spent a lot of time, but this is considered fanciful. As far as the gatehouse goes, I always feel a frisson of historical pleasure when catching sight of it in the distance.



**The gatehouse guards the keep as a steam train passes** (photo by Alan Santillo)

The gatehouse and the keep-tower are the two main features of the castle, although the curtain wall is noticeable from a distance. The outer enceinte, on which the tower and motte look down, has kept its shape fairly well, with one round corner-tower. There may have been others, but the ruins are currently a mystery to me. Also slightly mysterious is why the French word 'enceinte' meaning 'pregnant', should be used to describe the main defensive line of wall towers and curtain walls enclosing a fortification? There must be a reason...

The oval bailey (including the gatehouse) that adjoins the motte on the south-west is delineated by a rampart topped with a curtain wall, all surrounded by an outer ditch. Although preserved, it's unfortunately mostly buried. A lot of the curtain wall stands at parapet-level, except for a section that was removed in 1807-8 to improve views of the estuary when a two-storey crenellated house, known as Higher Lodge, was built within the bailey – sacrilege, along with the small grotto cut into the rock at the base of the motte as a garden feature. Sigh.

In 1270, Roger de Valletort sold the castle, its territory and the barony to Richard, Earl of Cornwall (1209-72), who enclosed a deer park around the site. Upon Richard's death, the castle and earldom reverted to the Crown and remained in royal ownership until 1337, when it was passed to the Duchy of Cornwall.

This duchy had been created by King Edward III (1312-77, reign from 1327) for his eldest son Edward, later known as the 'Black Prince'. What with his other many properties in the region, including his main administrative centre at Restormel Castle, poor old Trematon Castle was largely neglected (apart from the previously mentioned stay at the gatehouse).

According to a survey of 1337, the bailey contained a great hall, a kitchen, a Lady Chapel and a lodging chamber. At this time, the deer park was recorded as having 42 deer, which was a good reason for the Black Prince to visit the castle. During the summers of 1355 and 1363, when he was staying at Plympton and Plymouth for a few weeks, whilst preparing for expeditions to Gascony and Aquitaine, it would have been ideal to come and partake in a spot of deer hunting.



**Showing the curtain wall and Higher Lodge** (photo by Alan Santillo)

By the time of the Black Prince's death in 1376, Trematon Castle was decreasing in military significance. Ten years later, however, when there was a real threat of invasion from France, King Richard II (1367-1400, reign from 1377) had the castle repaired and a garrison installed. The invasion was postponed and the threat came to nothing, but at least Trematon was ready, willing and presumably able!

After this, the history indicates further neglect, with Trematon no longer required for national service. From 1392 to 1443, the castle was transferred from owner to owner (whichever duke or earl was in favour at the time), before being returned to the Crown. There was some local excitement in 1400, when the bailiff of Trematon, Geoffrey Penriche, took it upon himself to lead a group of armed men into Saltash in a failed effort to restore Richard II to the throne.

Exactly what he hoped to achieve is hard to understand. After a great deal of royal and political unrest, King Richard II, who was the son of Edward the Black Prince, had been deposed in 1399 by his cousin, who had become King Edward IV (1442-83, reign from 1461). Perhaps Geoffrey Penriche's uprising had been fuelled by loyalty to the Black Prince, but the townsfolk of Saltash were unmoved. It's easy to imagine that a fit of pique propelled Geoffrey to then steal some cash and several barrels of red wine before riding away into historical oblivion.

The decline of Trematon Castle continued. John Leland (c.1503-1552), who found favour in the court of King Henry VIII (1491-1547, reign from 1509) and was later referred to as the father of English local antiquity, wrote of it as "the king's round Castle of Trematon". Part of it was being used as a prison, but it was obviously in decline, "though great pieces of it yet stand firm, and especially the donjon."

The word 'donjon' is thought to derive from the Middle Latin word 'dominio', from which the word 'dominion' is still used. The word 'dungeon' also comes from donjon and therefore dominio. Academics (such as John Leland above) favour donjon to mean the great tower, or innermost keep, of the castle, but over the years in England it has come to mean a dungeon (as in a cell, or a French 'oubliette'). Meanwhile, the French still use donjon to refer to a keep/tower...

Regardless of such language complexities, Trematon Castle had obviously lost any dominion it ever had and King Henry VIII proceeded to close the castle's deer park and dispose of the deer. I have a feeling it was easy to 'dispose' of the deer within a gluttonous banqueting scenario.

However, the castle must still have been defensible up to a point, as the one surviving record of hostilities at Trematon concerns a Cornish uprising in 1549, known as the Prayer Book Rebellion. It was led by Humphrey Arundell, a faithful Catholic from Helland, near Bodmin. The old Latin Mass had been abolished, but many Cornish people spoke their old Celtic language and were far more familiar with the words of the Latin Mass than the English in the New English Prayer Book.

A petition was sent to the young King Edward VI (1537-53, reign from 1547), stating that although they would remain loyal, certain of them as Cornishmen understood "no Englyshe..." and furthermore, they had no recourse but to "utterly refuse thys newe serveses." It seems bizarre that people from Cornwall would understand no English, but it only goes to show that Cornwall is out on a limb from mainland England. I'm glad the Cornish language is being resurrected.

As the rebellion gathered force, many of the gentry sought protection in old castles, along with their families. Sir Richard Grenville (1542-91), whose ancestors had held land in Cornwall from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, took refuge in Trematon Castle with his wife and other Protestant gentlemen. The castle was besieged by some of the rebels, until one morning, Richard Grenville was persuaded by traitors that the rebels would behave fairly if he went outside to negotiate with them.

They did not behave fairly. Sir Richard was seized and threatened with death, unless those sheltering in the castle surrendered. There presumably wasn't much option, as they then surrendered. The castle was sacked and the rebels stripped the gentry of their fine clothes and jewellery, breaking a few fingers as rings were pulled off forcefully. All the men, including Sir Richard, were transported to Launceston, to be jailed with other Cornish Protestant gentry.

The Cornish rebels crossed the River Tamar into Devon and regrouped with men from Devon at Sampford Courtenay, where a vicious battle took place. It went badly for the rebels and the remainder of the Cornish contingent retreated to Cornwall. They were forced to make another stand at Okehampton, before being pushed back to Launceston. The leader of the rebellion, Humphrey Arundell (c.1513-50), was finally overpowered and imprisoned there in the castle.

After being transferred to the dungeons of Rougemont Castle in Exeter, he was taken to the Tower of London with other rebels. There, having been found guilty of high treason, he was hanged, drawn and quartered in January 1550, which was a brutal death indeed and hard to contemplate the suffering.

As for Sir Richard Grenville, it's thought that he contracted a fatal illness whilst in prison, from which he subsequently died in March 1550. This is not surprising, considering the conditions at that time. Furthermore, it's been suggested that if he'd stayed inside Trematon Castle in the first place, he and the others besieged would have been safe, since the rebels hadn't possessed the necessary weapons to attack such a stronghold. Over 5,500 lost their lives in the uprising.



**Rapeseed colours the castle view** (photo by Alan Santillo)

The castle recovered from this event, but afterwards seems to have been used as merely a minor administrative site. It had its other uses, though, as Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603, reign from 1558) ordered Sir Francis Drake (1540-96) to store his captured goods there, after his return from circumnavigating the world. The treasure from the Portuguese carrack (a 3- or 4-masted ocean-going sailing ship) named the *São Filipe* was taken during Drake's raid on Cadiz in April 1587.

The *São Filipe* was sited off the Azores on its return from the East Indies, laden with gold, spices and silk, valued at £108,000. After a brief exchange of fire, the carrack was captured. Drake's fleet returned to England in July, with Drake allowed 10% of the booty – so Trematon Castle was considered a safe storage place, after the goods were most likely landed at Antony Passage.

Later in the Anglo-Spanish War, during the 1590s, the castle became a prison for large numbers of captured Spaniards. In 1596, around 12 of them escaped and after attempting unsuccessfully to steal a boat, they fled into the countryside, spreading great alarm before their re-capture. One can only imagine the desperation of the escapees and the ensuing mayhem.

The castle seems to have once more been garrisoned during the English Civil War (1642-1651) between King Charles I (1600-49, reign from 1625) and Parliament, but records of this are unfortunately scant. After this period, it's considered very possible that the castle was one of those slighted in the west of England – that is, deliberately damaged by Parliament to stop Royalists using them.

Despite its ruinous condition, offenders who had been tried and found guilty were occasionally imprisoned there. It continued to be used as a prison until 1780 and was a very basic, dank and dirty place, no doubt. At some point in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century, it served a very different function, when its interior was used as a market garden, tended by a family of poor people who lived in the gatehouse. That seems a pleasingly beneficial outcome, serving the local community and also giving the family accommodation and a job.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the castle was leased on a long-term basis, which is when Higher Lodge was built within the bailey. This appears to have been attributed equally to either D A Alexander or Benjamin Tucker, which is odd and somewhat annoying. However, it seems likely that the latter would have been the one responsible for knocking down part of the curtain wall.

Benjamin Tucker was secretary to the Admiral Earl of St Vincent when he took a 90-year lease and set about his building plans. After clearing away remaining ruins within the bailey and knocking down parts of the curtain wall, he commenced building a 9-bedroomed house using some of the stone from the demolished walls. More of the stone ended up in boundary hedge-banks and probably some became hard-core for driveways laid out along the lines of former defensive ditches.

He landscaped the grounds, laying out gardens and building mock ruins, in which he utilised several carved stone doorways acquired from clearance work in the bailey. He created a large walled garden on the northern slope and also built glass-houses, an orangery, stables and other outbuildings. I can understand that he was a man with a lot of vision and prevented the castle from falling into further decay, but I find it hard to accept the vandalism of the bailey walls.



**A closer view of the keep, gatehouse and Higher Lodge** (photo by Alan Santillo)

Benjamin Tucker, revere him or remain distinctly dubious of him, was a very wealthy man, filling his new house with many treasures (presumably not left over from Francis Drake's ill-gotten gains). He refurbished the gatehouse, where he set up a museum of curiosities, including a 2,500-year-old Egyptian mummy and its two coffins – which frankly belonged in Egypt.

In the grounds of the castle was a memorial to Admiral John Jervis, Earl of St Vincent, who had suggested the construction of Plymouth Breakwater. His memorial was a block of the breakwater limestone, topped with his bust (which sounds peculiar however I write it). The bust was eventually transported into the house, but the breakwater limestone has since disappeared.

The castle was leased in the following years to a variety of people, including Brigadier-General Thomas Porter, who served at the relief of Kimberley in South Africa; Hugh Foot, Baron Caradon of St Cleer, who was Britain's representative to the United Nations and brother of the Labour Party leader Michael Foot; and Douglas Grant, who spent a lot of money restoring the castle when the Queen visited in July 1962. She was accompanied by the Lord Lieutenant of Cornwall, Sir Edward Bolitho and from the castle was driven to Fowey, to embark on the royal yacht *HMS Britannia*. Trematon Castle has had its fair share of famous people.

In 2012, Julian and Isabel Bannerman became the latest leaseholders and set about creating a garden, which they opened to the public at certain times. This would have been our chance to visit the castle, but and we missed it. I'm not at all sure what's happening as I write this in June 2020, but I hope very much that Trematon Castle will be available to visit, some day and somehow.

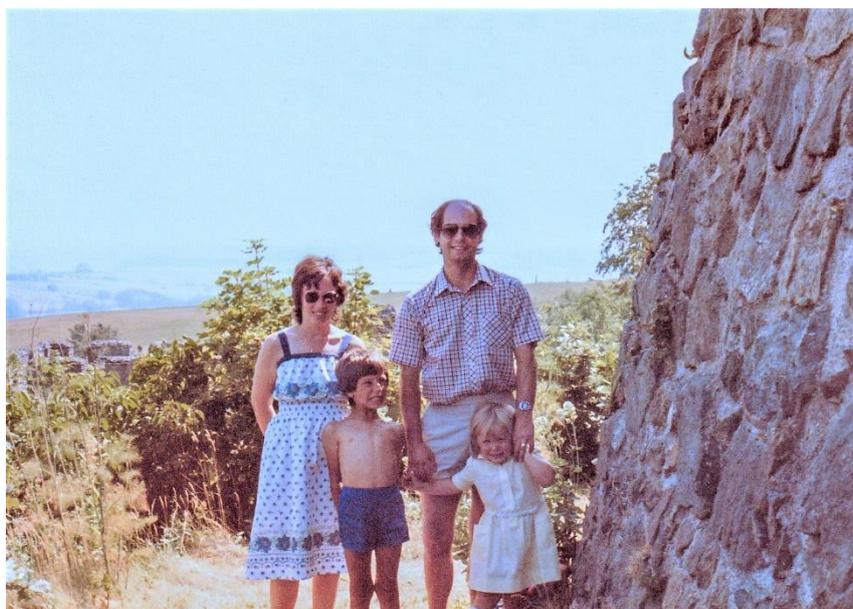
As a fascinating footnote, I found a reference online to a 2006 revival of a Black Prince Pageant that first took place at Trematon Castle in 1914, but ceased in 1938. The pageant had roots deep in history. When Edward the Black Prince was at Saltash on the eve of a battle, he needed to join his troops on the other side of the River Tamar. Two Saltash women rowed him across, but refused a reward, so the Black Prince then allegedly granted the 'passage' to Saltash inhabitants.

This does make sense, as the name Saltash Passage is still in common use today. It is situated on the Plymouth side of the River Tamar in St Budeaux, opposite Saltash. The name itself derives from the ferry route that was in operation between Saltash and Plymouth until 1961, when the Tamar Bridge opened. I really want the story to be true, with the past coinciding so neatly with the present.

I had no idea of the pageant's revival in 2006, as part of an inaugural Trematon Festival, marking the start of the Saltash Annual Regatta. A weekend of entertainment was on offer, courtesy of Cornwall and Devon's music and arts. Period costumes were on hand, as well as flags, drums and acrobatic court jesters. It must have been a sight, complete with a re-enactment of the Black Prince dressed in period armour, reading a scroll on behalf of his father, King Edward III.

All this so close and yet out of reach, but we *will* visit one day. One day I'll touch the stone of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century keep, but until then I'll carry on gazing from afar at Trematon Castle, which in the words of the military historian Sir Charles Oman (1860-1946): "...is high aloft, on one of the summits of the rather chaotic group of hill-tops which lie behind Saltash and its daring modern bridge."

In this instance, the "modern bridge" refers to the Royal Albert Bridge, designed as a railway bridge by Isambard Kingdom Brunel and opened by Prince Albert in 1859, but that's a different story...



**I could have touched the walls in 1984!**