

BERKELEY CASTLE

1 High Street, Berkeley, Gloucestershire GL13 9BQ

13th June 2022

I had heard of Berkeley Castle, but that was all, so it was exciting to find out that it has the prestige of being the oldest building in the country inhabited by the family who built it. Along with only two other landed families in England, the Berkeleys can trace their ancestry from father to son back to Eadnoth the Staller, in Saxon times. Rather than being a hopeless procrastinator, Eadnoth the Staller was a 'staller', or master of the king's horses, for Edward the Confessor.

A sunny morning heralded an even hotter day as we had an unhurried start with coffee chez nous, because Berkeley Castle was about 35 minutes' drive away from our holiday accommodation and didn't open until 11:00. We arrived almost right on time and were soon heading towards the entrance building for the castle. We passed some excellent information boards along the way, detailing the castle's distinguished and somewhat surprising history.

I immediately liked the warm pink stone of the castle buildings as we looked around outside and tried to get our bearings. As I noticed the figure of a soldier beside a cannon, looking out from the battlements over a drop of around 60 feet/18 metres to the lawn below, I had the feeling it was going to be a good visit.



Ready, aim...

The first recorded castle at Berkeley had probably been built not long after the Norman invasion of 1066. The aforementioned Eadnoth was one of only a few Saxon thanes who had found favour with William the Conqueror – a thane being a lord who held land granted directly by the king in return for military service in times of war, ranking between a freeman and a hereditary noble.

The first castle would have been a simple motte and bailey type, typical of that time, with a basic wooden fort built on top of an earth mound. Eadnoth died fighting for King William in 1068 and his son, Harding, who was too young to inherit his father's property, became a lawyer and businessman in Bristol instead.

One of Harding's sons, Robert Fitzharding, became a prosperous merchant and founded St Augustine's Abbey in Bristol, which later became Bristol Cathedral. In about 1154, the feudal barony of Berkeley was created when King Henry II (reign 1154-89) granted the castle to Robert Fitzharding. He was given permission by the king to rebuild the castle and set about the task with his son Maurice.

The circular shell keep was built in 1153-56 around the existing mound, with five round towers. The new castle was completed in about 1170 and the outer defences by about 1189. Maurice then adopted the surname Berkeley and for 300 years, the Berkeleys were one of 50-70 noble families who helped to govern England.



One of the castle towers

At the end of King John's reign (1199-1216), Robert II Lord Berkely was one of the leading barons who forced King John to sign the Magna Carta in 1215, thereby placing limitations on the king's powers. This turned against Robert when the king regained control and confiscated the castle. However, it was returned to Thomas III Lord Berkeley in 1223, in the reign of King Henry III (1216-72).

Thomas III Lord Berkeley held the castle when King Edward II (reign 1307-27) arrived as a prisoner in April 1327. This was a direct result of the king's huge unpopularity, due to his insistence on promoting his closest friends to power and allowing them to control the country. I believe it's called nepotism...

The rebellion had begun in 1321 by a small group of disillusioned barons, with Maurice Berkeley and his son Thomas amongst them. The rebellion failed and Maurice was imprisoned at Wallingford Castle, in Oxfordshire, where he died. Thomas was imprisoned at Pevensey Castle, Sussex, while Berkeley Castle was confiscated and given to a favourite courtier of King Edward II, Hugh Despenser.

By 1326, Edward's long-suffering queen, Isabella, with her ally Roger Mortimer, had gathered an army of supporters, who managed to free Thomas and returned Berkeley Castle to him. King Edward II, who had fled west into Wales, was captured and transported to Kenilworth Castle in Warwickshire. In 1327, he was forced to abdicate in favour of his son, Edward III.

Following several months at Kenilworth, which included a failed escape plot, Edward II was moved to Berkeley Castle. After an escape that ended in recapture, security was increased, but on 21st September 1327, the story abounds that murder most horrid took place, by a red-hot plumber's soldering iron being thrust up his nether regions. Some people consider it more likely that he either escaped, died of natural causes, was smothered in his sleep, or someone else was murdered in his place, but the truth remains open to conjecture...

Thomas Berkeley was later charged with complicity in the murder, but in 1337 he was cleared of all charges and in the 1340s, he spent huge sums of money extending the castle, including Thorpe's Tower to the north of the keep, the inner gatehouse to its south-west and other buildings in the inner bailey. All the main rooms outside the keep, including the buttery, kitchen, great hall and chapel (now the morning room) were also added at this time.



The inner 14th-century gatehouse

However, our own tour of the castle started a little uncertainly, as we weren't quite sure where to start. We had approached the castle through the Georgian walled garden, arriving in the outer bailey, which dates from the late-12th century and would have been where the barbican once was. Facing us was the west front of the castle and the bailey gate leading into the inner bailey.



The west front (photo by Alan Santillo)

To the left of the inner bailey entrance was the keep, the oldest standing part of the castle. An inner courtyard, known as the keep garden, was encircled by a stone wall and a few rooms. It was tranquil there, although I had trouble finding my bearings and already feel a further visit would be beneficial! The keep was the secure core of the castle and a place of refuge if the castle came under attack.



A shadowy gardener tends the keep garden (photo by Alan Santillo)

The entrance steps up to the keep replaced wooden stairs and were deliberately uneven, in an effort to cause an unknowing invader to lose his footing – hence their name 'trip steps'. Thankfully, we didn't trip. The bottom of the steps passed beneath a 'murder hole', through which murderous substances could be dropped.

At the top of the steps, I stood in awe in front of the doorway that led into the keep at first-floor level. It was an original Norman feature and the arched entrance still carries remnants of Romanesque sculptural decoration.



The keep doorway (photo by Alan Santillo)

In fact, I was beginning to notice that the doors and doorways of Berkeley Castle are quite incredible and I was continuously standing in front of them to admire them fully. In the case of the keep doorway, it had been reduced in size in the 14th century for greater security, with the inner door added for the same reason.

Once inside the castle, our tour of the rooms began, with numerous information boards describing the room itself, the history and the artefacts. As someone with very little sense of direction, I found it hard to know exactly where I was, but the rooms were wonderfully furnished with a great deal to look at that was well-displayed, so that each room gave a real sense of times past.



The morning room (photo by Alan Santillo)

Halfway up the grand stairs was the morning room, built by Thomas III Lord Berkeley in the 1340s. It had been dedicated as the Chapel of St Mary in 1364, the larger of two castle chapels, but was converted by the 8th Earl in the 1920s. As a chapel, part of the Book of Revelation had been written on the ceiling in Norman French, the language spoken at the castle at that time. Fragments of it can still be seen on the ceiling beams, a legacy of an early attempt to make the Scriptures accessible to ordinary people who could read.

The great hall had originally been a free-standing building within the curtain wall of the inner bailey, but had been completely rebuilt by Thomas III Lord Berkeley. It was particularly impressive, 65.6 feet/20 metres long and 32.8 feet/10 metres high and containing Norman arches, a 15th-century painted screen and a ceiling showing the original timber wood structure.



The great hall (photo by Alan Santillo)



The minstrels' gallery (photo by Alan Santillo)

There was a minstrel's gallery in the great hall, from which the last court jester in England, Dickie Pearce, fell to his death. His tomb is in the adjacent church of St Mary the Virgin – and on a further visit to Berkeley, this church is a must to visit.

Back to the history and there was plenty of it when Berkeley family members had fought in all the battles of the Hundred Years' War (1377-1453) between England and France. In 1399, Henry Bolingbroke, later to become King Henry IV (reign 1399-1413), invaded England in pursuit of his claim to the throne through his father, King Edward III's son, John of Gaunt. He met Thomas IV Lord Berkeley and other leading barons in the great hall, to plan his campaign to overthrow King Richard II (reign 1377-99).

When King Henry V (reign 1413-22) went to fight in France in 1415, Thomas IV Lord Berkeley was one of the nobles charged to oversee the government of England. However, Thomas died in 1417 with no heir, which began the 'Great Dispute' between cousins over who should own the castle and estates. For the next 50 years, lawsuits and armed skirmishes took family squabbling to a new level, until March 1470, when William Lord Berkeley's men killed the rival claimant, Lord Lisle, in what was known as the Battle of Nibley Green, a few miles away.

The Great Dispute may have ended, but the family squabbling continued. In 1492, in order to spite his brother, William Lord Berkeley donated all his lands to King Henry VII (reign 1485-1509) and his male heirs, so that the castle remained the property of the Crown for 60 years. Henry Lord Berkeley was just 19 when he regained ownership after the death of young King Edward VI (reign 1447-53).

However, the castle and estates were so valuable that they caught the acquisitive eye of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who was the favourite of Queen Elizabeth I (reign 1558-1603). He persuaded the queen to claim the castle and conveniently grant it to him – a descendant of Lord Lisle's family, no less.

Meanwhile, our tour found us down in the kitchen and other service areas which had been built in the 14th century and had been altered very little.



Down in the working area (photo by Alan Santillo)

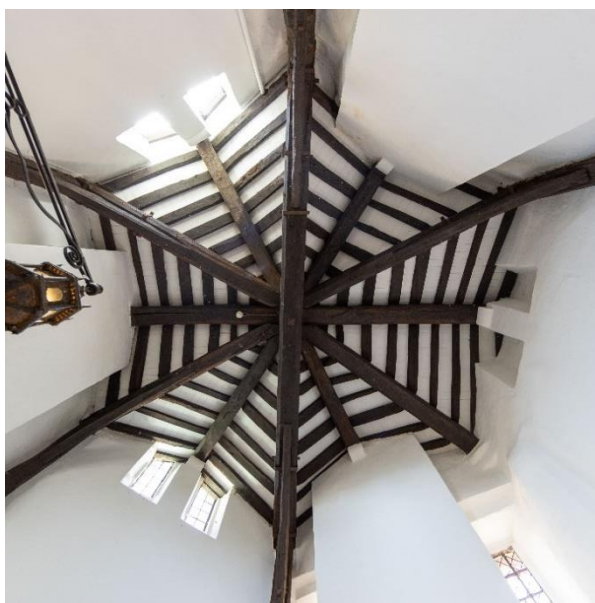
There were many everyday items on display that had been used in days gone by, particularly in the medieval larders, kitchen and buttery, the working hub of the castle. The buttery contained solid lead sinks, a pestle and mortar, chopping block and other utensils, with arches on the walls showing the positions of the early bread ovens. Many of the buttery's features still in the room date back to the 1300s. An underground passage led from the buttery to the castle's main well beneath the courtyard. This well supplied water to the castle until recently.

I was delighted to spot a mason's mark on the stone floor of the buttery. The mark had been chiselled into the stone to show how many stones the mason had cut, which indicated how much he should be paid. These marks would normally have been left on the underside of the flagstone, but it's surmised that the top face of this stone had been badly damaged and so the stone had been turned over.



Mason's mark

The kitchen had probably first been built as a free-standing tower, with a unique spider-web ceiling, high up to avoid sparks from three large fireplaces that would have constantly been lit – a fire had destroyed the previous ceiling. The kitchen contained lots of interesting items from days gone by, ranging from Tudor times to the 20th century. This medieval kitchen had actually remained in use until the 1950s, when a more modern family kitchen was made in the private apartments.



Spider-web ceiling (photo by Alan Santillo)

The housekeeper's room that the housekeeper would have used for her office was interesting. Reporting directly to the lady of the house and managing all the female staff (apart from kitchen staff), the housekeeper would have held an influential position – I couldn't help thinking of the shenanigans in *Upstairs Downstairs*...

The room contained a special artefact known as the Godwin Cup. This cup was believed to date from Saxon times, purportedly the property of King Harold's father, Godwin, Earl of Wessex, who had once owned the manor of Berkeley and surrounding land. Despite the fact that experts now believe the cup was made 550 years after Godwin's death, it is still an astonishing exhibit.



The Godwin cup (photo by Alan Santillo)

Back again to Elizabethan times and in 1596, Henry Lord Berkely's son married Elizabeth Carey, whose grandfather was patron of a company of actors that included William Shakespeare. It's said that Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for that particular wedding – if that's true, such fame!

In the late 16th century, Queen Elizabeth I visited the castle and played bowls on the bowling green, but there were rather more turbulent times during the English Civil War, between 1642-51. Although Berkeley Castle had long ago lost its significance as a defence against Welsh attacks, it was still a strategic stronghold between Bristol and Gloucester and ended up changing hands no less than five times between the Royalist and Parliamentary armies.

By 1645, it was held by a Royalist garrison, but was then captured by a Parliamentary force led by Colonel Thomas Rainsborough. The garrison had surrendered after a short siege when cannon was being fired at point-blank range from the roof of the adjacent church of St Mary the Virgin. A sensible decision.

The castle walls were left breached after the siege and a rather mean Gloucester county committee wanted to demolish the castle. These committees... Understandably, George VIII Baron Berkeley fought hard against this, claiming he'd already lost £20,000 in the civil war. The committee relented and the castle was restored to Baron Berkeley as long as the damage to the keep was never repaired and the castle would thus be rendered defenceless.

In 1646, some local men were brought in to take down part of the keep wall and the castle's weapons and defences were confiscated. Gloucester county committee issued an order to take care that the guns, ammunition in the castle and the drawbridge were removed to Gloucester – just to make sure, perhaps?

The condition that the keep wall should never be repaired is still adhered to today, due to an Act of Parliament drawn up at the time. The breach has actually been partially filled by some modern rebuilding, but this is merely a low garden wall that in effect stops people from falling 28 feet/8.5 metres into the keep garden. This is sensible, as without it there would no doubt be health and safety issues.

For the next hundred years, the family remained loyal to the reigning monarch and the country. In 1679, George II Lord Berkeley was granted an earldom by King Charles II (reign 1660-85), becoming the first earl of Berkeley. The castle had been left in a dilapidated state after the civil war and from 1699 to 1722, Charles II Earl of Berkeley carried out extensive renovation.

As we went in the various rooms, there were numerous treasures from the past that had been collected by members of the Berkeley family throughout the centuries, many of them reflecting the history of the castle and the family. These included a chest that may have been Francis Drake's, Queen Elizabeth I's bedspread and the banner the 4th Earl of Berkeley had taken to the Battle of Culloden in 1746, as well as many paintings, tapestries, silverware and ceramics.



The long drawing room (photo by Alan Santillo)

The long drawing room is thought to have been the castle's solar, but by the 18th century it was being used as a dining room. It now seems perfectly suited as it is.

In an octagonal turret opening off the long drawing room, there was a 14th-century wooden figure of the Virgin and Child – amazing to think of its age.



14th-century Virgin and Child

One aspect of the castle inner architecture that especially interested me was the 'Berkeley Arch', a most attractive style unique to the castle. There were several of these beauties, polygonal in shape with four or more straight sides enclosing a cusped/trefoil arch. Four in the great hall were graced by stained glass windows:



Berkeley arches in the great hall (photo by Alan Santillo)

There was no doubt about it, the Berkeley arches had appealed to me. The screens passage at the east end had three Berkeley arches leading to the service area – they were very lovely, but would fitting doors have been a problem?



Another Berkely arch (photo by Alan Santillo)

In the early 20th century, the 8th Earl of Berkeley repaired and modernised the castle to make it more comfortable, adding a new porch in the same Gothic style as the rest of the building. During the 1920s and 1930s, he installed plumbing and electricity. He also created the picture gallery by merging three rooms together, but probably his most visible change was the addition of the clock tower.



The clock tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

Although our tour was drawing to a close, I must return to the doors, which kept astounding me. In fact, the 8th Earl of Berkeley had introduced a number of doors, some of them with intricate carving and intriguing door knockers:



Truly astounding doors... (photos by Alan Santillo)



...and a door knocker

A staircase led down to a cellar with an unusually fine ceiling, which indicated the room may once have served as part of the treasury, where spices and candles would have been stored. Until the early 20th century, beer was brewed in buildings around the service courtyard and piped underground to the beer cellar. The barrels seen today would have held 450 or 600 gallons each!



The cellar (photo by Alan Santillo)

Leaving the gloom of the cellar and looking around us as we stood in the inner courtyard again, it seemed there were battlements, small towers, doors and windows of so many different shapes and sizes, all with varying shades of warm pink stone, shining in the sunlight. It was remarkable, if not a little dizzying.

It was past midday and had become decidedly hot, so we headed for refreshment in the large catering yurt near the car park, which provided inside and outside seating. Here we sat inside the yurt next to an opening and enjoyed a cold drink with a panini and some of the best chips I've had for years.

We then walked back to the castle gardens that subsequent owners had restored and embellished since the ravages of the civil war in the mid-17th century. They had filled the moat and created gardens on the terraces formed by the outer defences, but much of how it is today is thanks to the 8th Earl of Berkeley.



Flowers on the terrace (photo by Alan Santillo)



Who goes there? (photo by Alan Santillo)

The estate consists of 6,000 acres and includes one of the best examples of a medieval deer park. We walked in both directions from the terraces and explored the nooks and crannies we came across, but the heat was tiring us. We therefore decided to cool down with an ice cream from the yurt, before calling it a day.

It had been a visit to an exceptionally interesting castle, so small wonder it had been the location for various productions, such as scenes in the 2003 film *The Other Boleyn Girl* and also an episode in the 2017 television series *Who Do You Think You Are?* featuring the actress Courteney Cox – who discovered she is a direct descendant of the Berkeley family, which must have felt peculiar.

Although I found some aspects of the visit a little confusing at times, I would happily re-visit this castle that's the third-oldest continuously occupied one in England, after the Tower of London and Windsor Castle. Prestige indeed!



A garden view of the castle's great curtain wall