LUDLOW CASTLE

Castle Square, Ludlow, Shropshire SY8 1AY

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Having become somewhat of a historophile in my later years, I was very excited about today's planned visit to Ludlow Castle, with its interestingly royal past. It was only about a 35-minute drive away from our holiday accommodation, which was a bonus. There were quite a few clouds, but it was an ever changing scene and not too bad at all for a decent backdrop to some groovy castle photos.

Alan managed to locate the nearest car park in the market town and civil parish of Ludlow easily enough (although buying a ticket from the machine not quite as easily) and we were soon walking the short distance to the castle. Unfortunately, there were a number of modern notices right by the gatehouse, which to my mind was perilously close to it being used as a handy advertising space, rather than a revered historical building. I'm aware that I've turned into a castle purist in my old age, but I couldn't bring myself to take any gatehouse photos!

Just inside the gatehouse, on the east side, was the Castle House – that is, a 19th-century house incorporating a medieval tower. Much of the house is now used as the castle's visitor centre, with the addition of a restaurant and exhibition. Since the restaurant, posing very much as a café, was by the entrance, we took the opportunity to have a welcome cappuccino before paying the reasonable entrance fee of £9 each and entering the castle's outer bailey.

Inside Ludlow Castle's outer bailey (photo by Alan Santillo)

It was still relatively early and there weren't many visitors at first, although we'd noticed what looked like a few wedding guests near the entrance. We wandered around the outer bailey in the pleasant morning air while taking some initial people-free photos, just us and what sounded like a murder of crows squabbling over something or other. The sky was an obligingly photogenic blue and white.

In due course, we stood and admired the arched entrance to the inner bailey. The broader upper arch had been cut through the curtain wall in the late 12th century, while the narrower lower arch, was constructed in the 14th century.

The arched entrance

The castle ditch was on either side, which would have protected the first Norman castle on its most vulnerable side. It was now fairly overgrown with vegetation, including some elderflower bushes, which added a certain natural effect.

Just inside and to the right were the judges' lodgings, a three-storey block that had been built against the Norman curtain wall, probably before 1581. However, that's jumping ahead five centuries, so this is a good place for some early history.

Walter de Lacy arrived in England in 1066 during the Norman Conquest of England as a member of William FitzOsbern's household and was rewarded for his part in the victory by an earldom over Hereford lands. He was understandably met with local resistance for around three years and therefore set about keeping his new acquisition secure by having castles built along the border of England and Wales.

Walter de Lacy was the new earl's second in command and for his loyalty was rewarded handsomely (some might say excessively) with 163 manors spread across seven counties, 91 being in Herefordshire alone. One of these manors was known as Stanton Lacy, where Walter began building a castle, most of it built with Silurian limestone. Although it was originally called Dinham Castle, it was known later as Ludlow Castle and deemed to be the most important of Walter's castles. Not only was it situated at the heart of his estates, but it strategically lay at a crossroads over the River Teme, on a significantly defensive promontory.

Walter's good fortune ran out suddenly when he died in 1085 by ignominiously falling off scaffolding at St Guthlac's Priory in Hereford, while inspecting building progress there. He was buried in the chapter house at Gloucester Abbey and succeeded by his son, Roger de Lacy. However, Roger was implicated in the 1095 conspiracy against King William II (reign 1087-1100) and for his misdemeanour was exiled, with lands being passed to his brother Hugh.

The castle's stone fortifications are thought possibly to have been started as early as the 1080s and were completed before 1115, forming a ringwork based around what is now the castle's inner bailey. There were four towers and a gatehouse tower along the walls and it is said to be one of the first masonry castles in England (although a number of castles appear to lay claim to this).

Inside the inner bailey (photo by Alan Santillo)

Hugh de Lacy died without an heir in about 1115, after which King Henry I (reign 1100-35) gave Ludlow Castle and surrounding estates to Hugh's niece, Sybil. She married Pain FitzJohn, who happened to be one of the king's household staff. Pain (an unfortunate name) used Ludlow as his 'caput', the main castle in his estates, using knights' fees and the surrounding estates to maintain the castle.

Pain died in 1137 while fighting the Welsh, which resulted in a convoluted and lengthy inheritance and ownership struggle. Robert FitzMiles had been planning to marry Pain's daughter and laid claim, but so did Gilbert de Lacy, the grandson of Walter de Lacy. By that time, King Stephen (reign 1135-54) had seized the throne and he gave Ludlow to Robert FitzMiles, in exchange for Robert's political support.

During the messy civil war between Stephen and the Empress Matilda, Gilbert de Lacy rose up against Stephen and successfully managed to seize Ludlow Castle. In retaliation, Stephen took an army into the Welsh Marches and attempted to raise support by ordering one of his knights, Joce de Dinan, to marry Sybil, granting future castle ownership to them. Stephen set about laying siege to the castle and succeeded in recovering it, although at one point, Prince Henry of Scotland (Stephen's ally) was embarrassingly caught on a grappling hook thrown over the walls and ended up being rescued by Stephen himself.

Gilbert de Lacy maintained he was the rightful owner, which gave rise to a private (and probably vengeful) war between Joce de Dinan and himself. Gilbert ultimately succeeded and hence retook possession of Ludlow Castle before the civil war ended in 1153. Despite all this trouble, in around 1158 he became a member of the Knights Templar and travelled to the Holy Land, giving his property to his eldest son, Robert. Robert had no heirs when he died sometime before 1162, so the castle passed to his younger brother, Hugh de Lacy.

At some time during this turbulent period, the great tower was built by adapting the entrance tower and because the castle had become rather too small for a growing household, a spacious outer bailey was constructed to the east and south of the original castle. During this process, the castle's entrance was moved from the south to the east, so that it faced the expanding town of Ludlow.

The great tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

It was probably Gilbert de Lacy who had the circular chapel built in the inner bailey, in a similar style to churches of the Knights Templar order that he later joined. Talking of the chapel, we'd noticed there were rows of chairs arranged inside and it became clear that a wedding was due to take place, which confirmed that it had been wedding guests we'd seen earlier. It somehow seems very fitting that wedding ceremonies can still take place in such a historical, atmospheric place.

The Chapel of St Mary Magdalene

The castle's owner, Hugh de Lacy, took part in the Norman invasion of Ireland and was made Lord of Meath in 1172. He was consequently away a lot of the time and in his absence, King Henry II (reign 1154-89) confiscated Ludlow Castle, probably to ensure Hugh remained loyal, which seems rather a mean act. Hugh died in Ireland in 1186, with his heir being his young son, Walter, who was a minor and therefore unable to take charge of the castle until he came of age in 1194.

In 1194, when Prince John was rebelling against his brother, King Richard I (reign 1189-99), Walter took part in attacks against John. Richard disapproved of this and confiscated Walter's properties, including Ludlow. To recover his property, Walter had to pay a huge sum of 3,100 marks, although when he travelled to Ireland in 1201, his properties were confiscated again and placed under the control of his father-in-law, William de Braose. This time the return fee was 400 marks.

However, Walter's disagreements in 1207 with royal officials in Ireland resulted in John (by then king, reign 1199-1216) placing the castle in William's care again. Walter and John were reconciled, but by then William had fallen out with John. Violence ensued, with Walter and William taking refuge in Ireland while John took control of Ludlow. Finally in 1215, differences were smoothed out and John returned Ludlow to Walter. It was beginning to sound like a historical soap opera.

In 1223, Ludlow Castle was the venue for unsuccessful peace talks between the Welsh prince Llywelyn ap Iorwerth and King Henry III (reign 1216-72). Meanwhile, Henry was suspicious of Walter's activities in Ireland and with other measures to ensure his loyalty, took over the castle for two years. In May 1225 (before the two years were up), Walter implemented a campaign against Henry's enemies in Ireland and then paid Henry 3,000 marks for the return of his properties. By the 1230s, however, Walter's debts to both Henry and private moneylenders had become more than he could repay, so in 1238 he gave Ludlow Castle to Henry, although it was returned before he died in 1241. Definitely a historical soap opera.

The number of visitors had naturally increased as the morning wore on, with varying cloud cover that was a little difficult for photos. I was feeling very castle-happy, though, as we wandered around looking at different views.

Happy castle photography

After Walter's demise, his granddaughters Maud and Margaret were beneficiaries of his remaining estates, but both were unmarried, making it lawfully difficult for them to own property in their own right. The king therefore divided the estates between them, giving Ludlow to Maud and arranging for her to marry a favourite of his, Peter Geneva, at the same time also cancelling debts inherited from Walter. When Peter died in 1249, Maud married Geoffrey de Geneville (otherwise known pleasingly as Geoffroi de Joinville), an Anglo-French noble and a good friend of Prince Edward, the future king. On the whole, Maud did very well for herself.

In the 1260s, the second Barons' War erupted across England, resulting in Ludlow Castle being taken by the rebel leader, Simon de Montfort. Not long afterwards, though, it was recaptured by the supporters of King Henry III, probably led by Geoffrey de Geneville. Prince Edward had been captured, but escaped in 1265 and met with his supporters at the castle, before beginning a campaign to retake the throne. Simon de Montfort was killed at the Battle of Evesham in August 1265.

Geoffrey occupied the castle until he died in 1314. During this time, the great hall and solar block were built and the town walls were also constructed, linking to the castle to form a defence ring around the town. The solar block was built in two stages after 1283, with some modern up-to-the-13th-century-minute fireplaces and windows, although some of the windows were replaced in Tudor times.

The solar block (left) and great hall (photo by Alan Santillo)

The great hall was the most important room in the castle, 60 feet/18.2 metres long and 30 feet/9 metres wide, with an undercroft below. It was two storeys high, lit by tall windows with seat recesses and it had a raised dais with a stair behind that led to an upper gallery. There were four doorways at the bottom end of the hall, three of which opened into the solar block and the fourth to the battlements. The great hall must have been the scene of much grand activity, used for important public and ceremonial occasions, including banquets, music and entertaining.

Maud and Geoffrey's oldest granddaughter, Joan, married Roger Mortimer in 1301, which gave Roger control of the castle. In around 1320, he had the great chamber block built alongside the existing great hall and solar complex in the three-part design popular for domestic castle buildings at that time. A garderobe tower with accommodation was added outside the curtain wall, to aid Roger's lavish lifestyle.

The great chamber block housed the private apartments of the lord and lady of the castle and consisted of two floors. The first floor had just one room that was probably the original great chamber, with a fine fireplace and some figure carvings. The second floor was also originally one room, with a number of high-quality architectural features. It may have been a ladies' solar when first built, but by the 17th century, it had been partitioned. Part of it was called 'the great chamber' and the rest as 'the drawing chamber to the great chamber' – very descriptive.

L - R: Solar block, great hall and great chamber block

Roger de Montfort became heavily involved in the baronial revolt against King Edward II (reign 1307-27), which led to his imprisonment in 1322. He managed to escape from the Tower of London the following year and fled to France, where he formed an alliance (considered very likely to have been a love affair) with King Edward's estranged wife, Queen Isabella. Together they seized power in England in 1327, Roger becoming Earl of March and forcing Edward to pass the crown to his young son, also Edward, ruling England themselves in his name. Meanwhile, Roger's wife Joan was imprisoned by a retaliating king, which seems unfair.

St Peter's Chapel

Roger had a new chapel built in the south of the outer bailey, dedicated to St Peter, to honour the saint's day on which he'd escaped from the Tower of London. However, after a tumultuous course of events, the ambitious and decidedly unpopular Roger fell from power and was hanged in 1330, while his wife Joan was eventually allowed to keep Ludlow. Justice had finally prevailed.

The castle then gradually became the Mortimer family's most prestigious property, although in 1381, King Richard II (reign 1377-99) took advantage of the newest underage owner, another Roger Mortimer (2nd Earl of March), by placing the Mortimer estates in the control of a committee of senior nobles. When Roger died in 1398 leaving an underage son, Edmund (3rd Earl of March), the king took wardship of the castle again, until he was deposed from power in 1399, surrendering his throne to Henry Bolingbroke, who became King Henry IV (reign 1399-1413). How tenuous the rise and fall of kings…

When the Owain Glyndŵr revolt broke out and spread through Wales at the beginning of the 15th century, Ludlow Castle was in the control of Henry IV, who appointed military personnel to protect it from the rebels. In 1402, Edmund Mortimer's son, another Edmund, set out from the castle with an army against the rebels, but was captured at the Battle of Bryn Glas and at some point transferred his allegiance to Owain Glyndŵr. He married Catrin, who was one of Glyndŵr's daughters, before dying in 1409 at the siege of Harlech Castle.

Henry IV put Ludlow's heir, yet another Edmund Mortimer (Edmund the rebel's nephew), under house arrest and kept a tight grip on Ludlow Castle. The Welsh rebellion petered out and in 1413, King Henry V (reign 1413-22) granted Edmund the return of his estates, although he went overseas in the service of the king. The Mortimers thus rarely visited the castle, despite Ludlow town prospering from the cloth and wool trades. Edmund fell into debt and died childless in 1425.

Ludlow Castle was inherited by Edmund's sister's young son, Richard, the Duke of York, who took possession in 1432 and used it as an administrative base. His sons were established there in the 1450s, when the Wars of the Roses broke out. Rather than being involved in the fighting, Ludlow Castle acted more like a safe retreat.

The once safe retreat as it is today (photo by Alan Santillo)

Richard was killed in the Battle of Wakefield in 1460 and the following year his son Edward seized the throne as King Edward IV (reign 1461-83). He took control of Ludlow Castle and merged it with Crown property, setting up a council there to govern his Welsh estates. Possibly due to his own childhood time at Ludlow, he sent his own sons, the princes Edward and Richard (the 'Princes in the Tower') to Ludlow in 1473. It was here that young Edward was told his father had died and he was to be King Edward V, before he was duped in suspicious circumstances by his father's brother, who became King Richard III (reign 1483-5).

Although Ludlow Castle was the seat of the newly formed Council of Wales and the Marches, it had become mainly residential. When King Henry VII (reign 1485-1509) seized the throne in 1485, he used it as a regional base and granted it to his son, Prince Arthur in 1493. In 1501, Arthur spent a few months at Ludlow with his new wife, Catherine of Aragon, before he died there the following year.

Between 1525 and 1528, Mary Tudor spent 19 months at Ludlow, overseeing the Council of the Marches, with the great chamber being used as the council's meeting room. The responsibilities of this council, set up by King Edward IV, had grown in importance over the years to incorporate the government of Wales and its border counties, including the dispensing of justice.

In the 16th century, the Tudor lodgings replaced older buildings next to the great chamber block and were used to accommodate messengers, attorneys and clerks:

The Tudor lodgings

After 1534, the Council of the Marches' authority increased and renovation to the castle was necessary. In 1552, the porter's lodge and prison were built in the outer bailey. Lodgings were also built along the south side of the curtain wall, in order to accommodate the judges hearing cases. Although smaller than other chambers, they had fireplaces and larger windows, even having a laundry next to them.

Judges' lodgings

During a time when many similar fortifications were falling into disuse and decay, the Council of the Marches resulted in Ludlow Castle gaining a new lease of life, which meant that improvements and modernisation continued. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603), although firstly a centre of administration, the castle ended up with many features of an Elizabethan stately home, with more family apartments and the former royal apartments being used as a guest wing.

The great hall was decorated with the coats of arms of council officers, the larger windows of the castle were glazed, a clock was installed and water was piped into the castle, as befitted a property of some importance. A fountain and a tennis court were added, as well as a viewing platform and walks, to complete the grandeur. As for the judicial amenities, they were further improved by converting the 14th-century chapel into a new courthouse, with extra provision made for storing records. It must have been a thriving location.

In 1616, King James I (reign 1603-25) declared his son Charles the Prince of Wales and Ludlow Castle was his principal Welsh castle. Despite the prestige, however, the Council of Marches received increasing criticism over its legal practices, so much so that an Act of Parliament stripped it of its powers in 1641.

During the English Civil War (1642-46), the castle was Royalist, but when the Parliamentarians gained control it was surrendered after a short siege in 1646. In 1648, there was a failed Royalist plot to retake the castle, but no other military action occurred apart from that. After being initially garrisoned, most of the weapons in the castle were removed in 1653 for security reasons and sent to Hereford, after which the garrison was disbanded completely in 1655.

King Charles II (reign 1660-85) reinstated the Council of the Marches in 1661, but the castle never recovered from the civil war and the council was disbanded in 1689. This brought Ludlow Castle's important governmental role to an end and its abandonment led to rapid deterioration. By 1708, only a few rooms were usable and by 1715, roofs were stripped of lead and wooden floors were in a state of collapse. Trees, ivy and shrubs had grown over stonework and in the mid-1700s, the castle was stripped of what remained, with stone being reused elsewhere.

The Crown leased the castle to the interested Earl of Powis in 1772, although he died shortly afterwards. However, his son George maintained the lease, levelling the interior of the inner bailey and improving the site with a few repairs, as well as planting trees and creating paths around the castle. The Picturesque style was attracting tourists and ruins were popular, which resulted in Ludlow town becoming fashionable, with the castle a focus of inspiration for painters.

In 1811, the castle was bought for £1,560 by Lord Clive, Earl of Powis and is now owned by the trustees of the Powis Castle Estate. Much work was carried out, with the castle being put to a number of uses, including sporting events and agricultural shows, while the grassy areas of the bailey were kept cropped by grazing goats and sheep. The old prison was utilised as an ammunition store by the local volunteer militia and part of the bailey was used as a timber yard.

Archaeological excavations began in 1903 and in 1915, the castle was declared by the state to be an ancient monument, although still owned and maintained by the earl and trustees of the Powis estate. Between the 1910s and 1920s, larger trees were cut down, the cellars were cleared of debris and animals were cleared from the site on the grounds of health and safety to the public. Times were changing!

During World War II, the great tower was used as a lookout post by the Allied military and the grounds used by the United States' forces for baseball games. It had continued to be a well-used castle, but during the 1970s and early 1980s, the Department of the Environment took the unusual step of lending government staff to the Powis Estate to help repair the castle, as visitor numbers had fallen.

Nowadays, the trustees work closely with English Heritage, the latter considering Ludlow to be "one of England's finest castle sites". I tended to agree, as we sat at a picnic bench in the outer bailey and ate our lunchtime sandwiches, before walking around the outer bailey and looking more closely at its building features.

Mortimer's Tower

Mortimer's Tower was interesting on the western curtain wall, having been built in the 13th century, but taking its name from the Mortimer family – one wonders why? Unlike most of the rectangular towers at Ludlow, this one is of a D-design, originally built as a three-storey gateway that may have been used as a gatehouse to control a rear exit from the castle that had a direct route to Wales. However, the entrance was blocked up in the 15th century, so it resembled a standard wall tower. In the 16th century, an additional floor was added, but it is now roofless, despite having been roofed at the end of the 19th century.

Near where we had sat at a wooden bench for lunch, the eastern wall seemed to exude a strong historical presence. Now open to the elements, it had once housed the 16th-century porter's lodge, prison and stable block. The porter's lodge and prison were both two storeys high and built in ashlar stone, while the stable block at the end was built in more basic stone. In its heyday, the prison exterior was decorated with the coats of arms of Henry, Earl of Pembroke and Queen Elizabeth I, although these have disappeared, along with the original barred windows.

Porter's lodge, prison and stable block (photo by Alan Santillo)

I was reluctant to leave such an inherently historic site, one with layers of royal connections and with many parts of it still in a very reasonable condition. As we'd wandered around, I'd been particularly interested as ever in details around doors and windows, all of which enhanced the building itself and also our visit.

On writing this account, I've discovered the well is considered to be of particular archaeological interest, which now I come to think of it makes complete logical sense. In existence from the start of the castle's history, it will naturally be a repository of all items that will have found their way down into its depths over the years, resulting in intact layers of artefacts and organic residue.

Ludlow Castle's well is situated in the inner bailey, by the rear entrance of the stone keep and would have been securely dug down and lined when first built by the Normans in the late 11th century. I wonder why castle wells aren't excavated as a matter of course? I love the feeling that there's always more to discover about our intriguing old buildings and the marvellous Ludlow Castle is no exception.

The well in the inner bailey

Delightful details
St Mary Magdalene chapel (left) & great chamber block (right)