LYDFORD CASTLE

Lydford, Okehampton, Devon EX20 4BH

24th June 2020

This was one of our fairly local castles visited many moons ago. I say visited, but all I can really remember is walking past and feeling a sudden sense of deep chill that was nothing to do with the weather at the time. I certainly didn't want to hang around or investigate then and managed to resist a re-visit for over thirty years, until now. This time I investigated the history before heading there on a very hot day, just as the first Covid lockdown restrictions were easing.

Lydford is situated on the western edge of Dartmoor. Exactly when the settlement was established is unknown, but nearby fresh water and woodland probably had a lot to do with it, plus the deep gorge carved out by the River Lyd to offer protection. First known as Hlidan, it was probably named after the turbulent river bordering it. Since the Anglo-Saxon word 'hlyda' means loud, this makes sense.

During the reign of Alfred the Great (871-899), Lydford was one of four Devon towns listed in the Burghal Hidage* (see end), a late 9th-century list of fortified towns, or burhs, in the Saxon kingdom of Wessex. These were part of a network of strongholds built to defend Wessex from Viking invasion (and possibly the Cornish Dumnoni tribes). Lydford streets were laid out in a still visible grid pattern, with later footpaths and hedges retaining the position of earlier streets.

Lydford was protected on its southern and eastern sides by the deep river valleys, but its northern side had no such natural protection. A deep ditch and earthen rampart had therefore been constructed, which may have been topped by a palisade of wooden stakes. The remains of this rampart can still be seen as the village is entered from the north-east, on either side of the road near the village hall. Before our visit, we'd downloaded a free audio guide from the English Heritage website and were thus able to locate these earth defences quite easily, which I'm not sure we would have done otherwise 😊

A section of the earth defences once surrounding Lydford
(photo by Alan Santillo)

Excavations have indicated that these defences were built in two phases. The first bank was made with saplings and turf and supported a timber structure, which may have been used as a fighting platform. The front of the rampart was later faced with more substantial granite blocks. It was likely to have been built in sections and was perhaps maintained and defended by different people.

By the late 10th century, Lydford had its own mint, its prosperity probably a result of profits from the tin trade. This wealth was evident from the amount of taxes paid to the king being as much as those paid by Barnstaple and Totnes. The earliest coin known to have been minted at Lydford dates from 937, during the reign of King Athelstan (924-939), the grandson of Alfred the Great. Over a million pennies were struck in the reign of King Ethelred II (978-1016).

Production ceased by about 1050, but the Lydford mint had been operational for over 100 years and had produced in excess of 1.5 million silver pennies. Each penny was made of solid silver, measuring about 0.79 inches/20 millimetres in diameter, with a weight of nearly 0.06 ounces/1.6 grams. At the time, a silver penny was more or less payment for a day's work. A long cross on the reverse of the coin allowed it to be cut in quarters if necessary.

Over 400 coins bearing the name of Lydford survive today, but interestingly, most of them are in Scandinavia. This fact points to them being payments of Danegeld – that is, a tax collected to pay off the Vikings to prevent them coming over the sea to raid and pillage. English Heritage suggests they were paid "as tribute to the Danes", but it seems to me as if they were a form of cash bribes?

Despite this possible 'insurance', Viking invaders arrived at the River Tamar in 997 regardless and proceeded to burn Tavistock Abbey down to ground level on their way to Lydford. They had presumably been tempted to Lydford by the successful mint, but Lydford's defences helped to repel them.

At the time of the 1066 Norman invasion, Lydford was very much a thriving place. However, in the year after the Norman Conquest, an Anglo-Saxon revolt against Norman rule was centred in Exeter. It was suppressed, but in order to prohibit widespread revolts in the region, William the Conqueror had castles built in Exeter, Totnes and Lydford (as well as possibly Barnstaple).

At Lydford, an earth and timber ringwork fortification was built on the isolated south-west corner of the burh, measuring only 180 feet/55 metres by 200 feet/60 metres. It was protected by a deep ditch and an earth rampart that was about 23 feet/7 metres high. The rampart as it is today measures at almost 12 feet/3.6 metres, which is just over half of its original height. Initially, it would have been supported internally with some huge wooden posts.

It was easy to locate, quite close to both the very visible later castle and also the church of St Petroc – and to my delight, the audio guide very helpfully talked us through the straightforward directions. Apart from that, the Lydford information boards were among the better ones I've seen on various castle visits.

It had become very hot by the time we'd arrived at the Norman castle remains, but we were able to shelter under some trees whilst listening to the audio guide (and waiting for some other visitors to leave, for photographic purposes).

The deep ditch

Inside the castle had been the remains of five rectangular buildings with walls of wattle and daub. Archaeological excavations in the 1960s revealed a mass of charred oats and rye, indicating they were probably used as granaries. These storage facilities may have been intended for supplying Norman troops, but this first castle was in use for a short time only and was likely abandoned by about the middle of the 12th century. The grain stores were at some point destroyed by fire, although whether this was by accident or design remains uncertain.

The Norman fortification/castle

By the late 12th century, Lydford's fortunes had begun to diminish, as much of its trade, influence and status was being taken by the neighbouring towns of Launceston, Okehampton and Tavistock. The government of King Richard I attempted to promote Lydford's growth by revitalising trade. In 1195, what is today called Lydford Castle was built, having been commissioned in 1194 by Prince John, while his brother Richard was otherwise occupied elsewhere.

The 'castle' was a simple two-storey tower east of the church, referred to in documents as a "firme domus" meaning strong house, as well as "castelli de Lideford", meaning Lydford Castle. The consensus is that it was not designed for a military purpose, although when King John came to the throne in 1199, he had the castle garrisoned and equipped to deter political unrest.

The stone tower in question was square (52 feet/16 metres by 52 feet/16 metres) and free-standing, with a surrounding bailey, but no gatehouse. The bailey was rectangular, protected by ramparts and deep ditches on both its south-west and north-east sides. The north-west side was protected by ramparts and the valley of the original burh, while the south-east side is thought to have formed a small courtyard in front of the tower. This area is now taken up by part of the 13th-century earthworks and had probably been the castle's initial entrance.

The south-east side fronting the main village street today

The walls of the tower were roughly built with granite and slate, up to 11 feet/3.4 metres thick and pierced by arrow slits. Along the centre of the building was a spine wall, which divided each floor into two rooms. Interestingly, an internal water supply was installed, the decorated spout of which is said still to survive. Despite probably being roughly built, it seems intriguing that someone deemed a decorative spout necessary? However, we failed to find any water spout.

At the time the tower/castle was built, there were widespread problems with law and order in England. Areas classed as 'forest' were subject to royal jurisdiction with a great many restrictions on hunting, building and the use of local resources (in this case, a lucrative tin mining industry). The forests were often chosen for their natural resources and were expected to provide the Crown with money and/or raw materials. Control over the forest and its trades was enforced by the Crown and in 1195, the forest of Dartmoor extended across most of Devon.

It seems Lydford Castle was purpose-built to act as a court and prison to deal with cases infringing the forest laws and the stannary laws. In medieval England, stannary law was a legal system for controlling the tin industry, regulated by the Crown by taxes and fines for any breaking of those laws.

From the end of the 12th century, the output of tin increased and a Warden of the Stannaries was appointed. Lydford was responsible for overseeing administration in Dartmoor's four stannary towns: Ashburton, Chagford, Plympton and Tavistock.

In 1204, King John reduced the extent of the royal forest and removed much of Devon from Forest Law, leaving what is now known as Dartmoor. The remaining forest was still subject to forest laws, with a specialised group of legal officials meeting at Lydford Castle to issue fines and other punishments. Lydford stayed in royal ownership until 1238, when King Henry III granted it to his brother Richard, 1st Earl of Cornwall, as part of a princely endowment.

In legal terms, this meant that the forest area of Dartmoor was converted to a chase, although the earls of Cornwall still held law courts at the castle to enforce chase laws that were very similar to the former forest laws. For the sake of clarity (and a nugget of new learning for me), a chase was common land used for hunting that carried reserved hunting rights for one or more people, but with no designated officers and laws. Similarly, a royal chase is Crown estate where certain rights are reserved for a member of the royal family. That seems like taking advantage?

However, Richard of Cornwall took a keen interest in developing Lydford, creating an additional market and introducing a new fair, which was important in those days. The renovations that were carried out on the castle were probably intended to imitate older motte and bailey designs, with the finished product being reminiscent of those former symbols of power and political status.

The south-west side of Lydford Castle

Part of the original tower was stripped back, with the existing walls levelled off at around 14 feet/4.3 metres and the ground floor arrow slits filled in. Earth was heaped around the lower storey to create the impression of a motte 17 feet/5.2 metres high – some infilling of the ground floor was needed to equalise pressure on the walls from the mound. The original ground floor had become an underground basement with a grim 'pit prison' (*puteus* in Latin). This would have been used for prisoners of low status, reached by a ladder from the first floor. Totnes Castle and Farnham Castle also have mottes built against the keep walls.

Two more storeys of a better standard were added on top of the old levelled walls, less thick at around 6 feet/1.8 metres and with a higher proportion of granite. The structure itself remained more or less the same, but the new tower was slightly smaller at around 48 feet/15 metres by 47 feet/14 metres.

The first floor was relatively basic, with several rooms of varying levels of comfort, intended to function as the prison. The second floor, though, was somewhat better furnished, with a hall and a chamber that probably served as a courtroom and also accommodation for the keeper, or chief gaoler, of the castle. At this time, a bailey was established on the north-west side of the tower.

Entrance on the north-west side (photo by Alan Santillo)

Richard's son, Edmund, became the second Earl of Cornwall in 1278, but he preferred Restormel and Lostwithiel over Lydford. By the time of his death in 1299, the castle had become ruinous and reverted to the ownership of the Crown.

In 1307, King Edward II made Piers Gaveston (with whom he had a controversial relationship), Earl of Cornwall, as well as arranging for him to marry Edward's niece, Margaret de Clare, sister of the powerful Earl of Gloucester. Lydford Castle was passed to him, after which it was repaired and again used as a prison.

However, Edward and Piers both eventually fell from grace – Piers was executed in 1312 and Edward was forced to abdicate and pass the throne to his son Edward, who was crowned King Edward III in February 1327. Edward II was transferred to Berkeley Castle, where it is believed he was murdered in September that year. Piers Gaveston's widow leased Lydford Castle to Tavistock Abbey, but after her death in 1342, the castle and manor became part of the Duchy of Cornwall.

In 1337, King Edward III had made his eldest son Edward the first Duke of Cornwall, thus having created the Duchy of Cornwall. Edward the son died before his father and was known after his death as the Black Prince, probably because of the black armour he wore. When the Black Prince acquired both Dartmoor and Lydford Castle in 1342, extensive repairs were carried out to the castle over the following three years, so that it was well-roofed and decorated inside.

The situation fluctuated as situations do, and in 1390, the castle roof was stripped for its lead, which was used on castles in Cornwall. After 1425, the Crown let the castle to different people, including Sir Walter Hungerford (the only surviving son and heir of Sir Thomas Hungerford, of Farleigh Hungerford Castle in Somerset). The well at Lydford Castle may also have been dug during the 15th century. After 1485, the Duchy took back control of the castle.

Lydford had remained the centre of forest administration throughout the 14th and 15th centuries and the castle continued its prison role for offenders against forest and stannary laws. At the start of the 14th century, it had been considered overly lax and despite numerous complaints, had earned a reputation for being a terrible place by the end of the century. Rhymes complaining about 'Lydford Law' date back as far as 1399 and continued to be popular for several centuries.

The best-known inmate was the Plymouth MP Richard Strode. A tinner himself, he attempted in 1510 to introduce legislation that limited the rights of Dartmoor tin miners, as mining debris in moorland rivers was silting up Plymouth Harbour. An influential opponent brought charges against him and at the stannary court held at Lydford Castle, Strode was fined £160. He refused to pay and was promptly imprisoned at the castle for three weeks.

Although it was a short sentence, he described the goal as: "…one of the most annoious, contagious and detestable places within this realme." He really didn't like it very much. He described how he was thrown into a deep pit under the ground, fed only bread and water and was locked in leg cuffs until he managed to bribe the keeper to remove them.

He was eventually released because of a letter from the Exchequer and returned to Parliament. He then petitioned his fellow MPs to pass an act that granted them all immunity from prosecution resulting from parliamentary pursuits. This was designed to reverse the local court ruling that had resulted in his incarceration and also to protect MPs from similar future cases. The Privilege of Parliament Act became law in 1512 and is known as Strode's Act to this day. No comment!

Inside view with blocked-off steps leading down (photo by Alan Santillo)

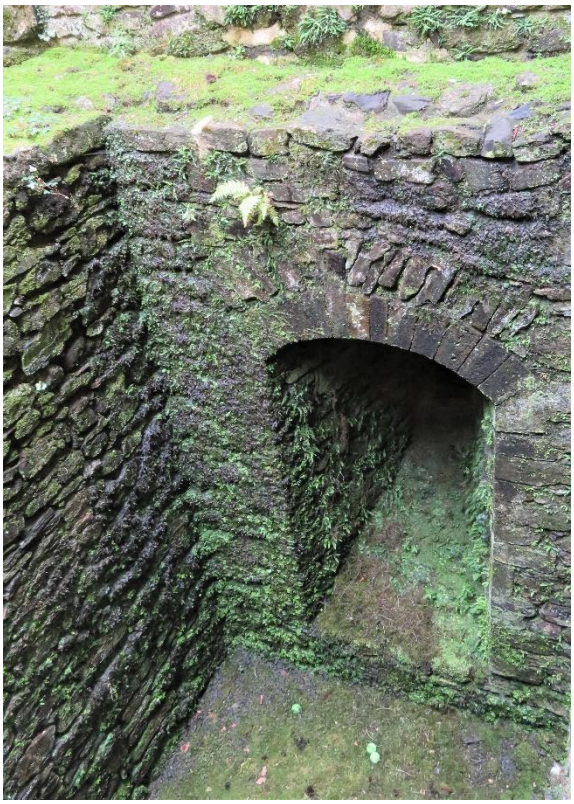
By 1546, Lydford Castle was again in poor repair. Some renovation work was undertaken during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, although a later report in 1618 suggested the castle was in such an appalling condition that it wasn't fit to function as a prison. Fresh repair work was carried out in the 1620s and 1630s, during the reign of King Charles I, but by 1650 it was described as being in significant decay. Floors had fallen in and only the roof was intact.

Lydford Castle definitely had a bad reputation – not just for the building, but also for the stannary court's record of rough justice. True or not, in 1644 the Devon poet William Browne wrote:

I oft have heard of Lydford Law,
How in the morn they hang and draw,
And sit in judgment after:
At first I wondered at it much;
But since, I find the reason such,
As it deserves no laughter.

The origin of this reputation is unclear, although one possible reason could be the tendency of the court sitting at the castle to hang offenders on the mere assumption that the parallel court would pass the same sentence.

This parallel court, despite being actually entitled to make such judgments, only sat once every three years. Small wonder that the phrase 'Lydford Law' was used for centuries to refer to judicial cruelty – and also perhaps small wonder that I'd sensed a deep chill on that first visit, despite not being particularly prone to such experiences. It didn't feel nearly as bad with the sun beating down, but it wasn't exactly a happy place. Interesting, but not happy…

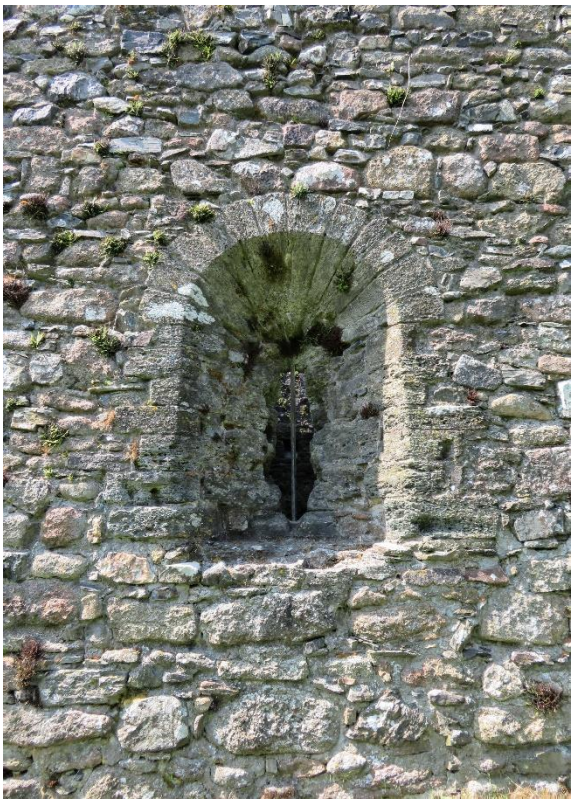


Down below - a dank and gruesome place

The castle was still being used as a gaol at the time of the Civil War (1642-1651), when it was used by the Royalist commander Sir Richard Grenville as his main military prison in the area. Its reprehensible reputation continued, from the Parliamentarian point of view, as a place used to promptly execute military prisoners and to extort money from civilians using the threat of imprisonment.

At the end of the Civil War, the castle was assessed to be almost completely ruined and appears to have been sold off by Parliament. When King Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660, Lydford Castle and the Forest of Dartmoor were returned to the Duchy of Cornwall. The castle courts were still held, but repairs were lacking and a report in 1704 stated that stannary laws could not be administered without a working prison.

By 1733, repairs had brought the castle back into a better condition, with the spine wall being rebuilt and the second-floor windows being enlarged. However, some other alterations and additions were considered to be nothing more than patching the decaying fabric of the castle. At the beginning of the 19th century, Sir Thomas Tyrwhitt, the Lord Warden of the Stannaries, began the construction of Dartmoor Prison in Princetown. This much larger and more substantial building naturally grew in importance and the courts gradually moved there from Lydford.



Not much of a view from a window on the north-east side

The castle fell into decline yet again and the courtroom became structurally unsafe, so that Lydford Castle was finally abandoned in 1833. In the mid-19th century, the Duchy of Cornwall rejected proposals to repair the castle in order to make it serviceable again, on the grounds of being too expensive. The site was enclosed for safety reasons and by the 1870s, the castle's roofs and floors had either collapsed or had been removed. As for the town of Lydford, it had suffered a vast decline since its heady days of medieval significance.

In 1932, the Duchy of Cornwall gave the castle to the Office of Works. Repairs were made in the 1930s and 1950s, followed by archaeological explorations in the 1960s. The castle is now in the hands of English Heritage, although the Norman fort is owned by the National Trust – both wonderful organisations.

I'm so glad we made a return visit to Lydford Castle, despite it being described by the historian Andrew Saunders as "the earliest example of a purpose-built gaol" in England. I'm not surprised the castle is said to be haunted by Judge Jeffreys, who was appointed by King James II to try the rebels of the Monmouth Rebellion.

This was also known as the Pitchfork Rebellion, the Revolt of the West, or the West Country Rebellion and was an attempt by Protestants to overthrow the new Catholic king. It was largely known as the Monmouth Rebellion, however, because James Scott, 1st Duke of Monmouth, was the eldest illegitimate son of King Charles II and claimed to be a rightful heir to the throne.

Judge Jeffreys presided over many courts in Devonshire towns that were referred to as the "Bloody Assizes" – no doubt due to his predilection for hanging. He became known as 'the hanging judge' and the legend goes that he was at his brutal best at Lydford. Whether this is true or not is unknown, due to a scarcity of historical evidence that he ever actually visited Lydford. Since he met his own end at the Tower of London in 1689, I suspect a degree of legendary licence.

Whatever the reality, it's a fascinating area and there may have been an even earlier castle in Lydford. A historical record refers to Aelfthryth, Queen of Wessex, being born in 945 at a castle in Lydford. If only the truth could be known.

Another bonus was suddenly coming across an inscribed triangular stone sitting nonchalantly in the field area adjacent to the south-west side of Lydford Castle:

A reminder of the Viking past

It was a commemorative runic stone carved in local granite, commissioned to mark the 1,000th anniversary of the Vikings' raid in 997. A small plaque read: "VIKINGS 997–1997: The stone was raised when the men of the North came again, this time in peace. Erik the Red carved the runes." Yes, the plural carved runes – by some dastardly oversight, we somehow missed one.

Erik the Red was a local stonemason and a Lydford resident, while the "men of the North" on the plaque referred to a group of peaceful Danish visitors, who took part in the Viking Festival celebrations in 1997. When the runic stone was unveiled, a 'sacrifice' of mead was poured over it, which seems fitting, if not a little wasteful! The stone we missed was a pillar of granite with a sculpture of a Danish axe on a Saxon shield. Perhaps another visit is required?

Beside Lydford Castle stands the church of St Petroc, dating from the 15th century, but with some 13th-century parts. Records show the Bishop of Exeter dedicated the church in around 1250 and again in 1261. Was it so good that he dedicated it twice? More probably, it was because improvements had been made. The historical highlight, though, is the tub-shaped font thought to be pre-Norman and one of only three similar in Devon. There are also intricate wood carvings at the end of pews and I do love a bit of wood carving. Another visit is a *very* good idea.

The church of St Petroc (photo by Alan Santillo)

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***** The Burghal Hidage stated that at times of possible attack from an enemy, the peasants of the land associated with a burh should congregate inside its defensible boundary. These poor unfortunate peasants were required to provide a defensive force of one man per hide. A hide was an English unit of land measurement that was originally meant to represent the amount of land required to support a household. Traditionally taken to be 120 acres, it was in reality a measure of value and tax assessment, including obligations for maintenance, rent, food and repair of bridges. Yet another aspect of old English life that has passed into oblivion.