SCOTNEY CASTLE

Lamberhurst, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN3 8JN

7th July 2019

Scotney Castle is an English country house incorporating the ruins of a medieval moated manor house known as Scotney Old Castle, situated on an island in a small lake. However, since the original building is thought to have been constructed in about 1378 during a time of much discord between England and France, as well as looking like a fortress, it's a pity to disregard it.

It was one of the places we'd first been whisked around by my fidgety father-in-law in 1982 and all I could vaguely remember was a romantic-looking castle with a moat. I was therefore looking forward to a second acquaintance, despite a morning of quite bulky cloud. The air was pleasantly warm regardless and as soon as we arrived, we stopped at the café for a cappuccino, which we drank outside under an awning.

After then presenting ourselves at the entrance, we were given a timed ticket to go inside the house at 11:00-11:15, having discovered that the more modern house had been built in 1837 from sandstone quarried from the grounds of the old castle (the one remembered from the first fleeting visit). The old castle was already tantalisingly recognisable in the distance:

Scotney Castle amongst the trees (photo by Alan Santillo)

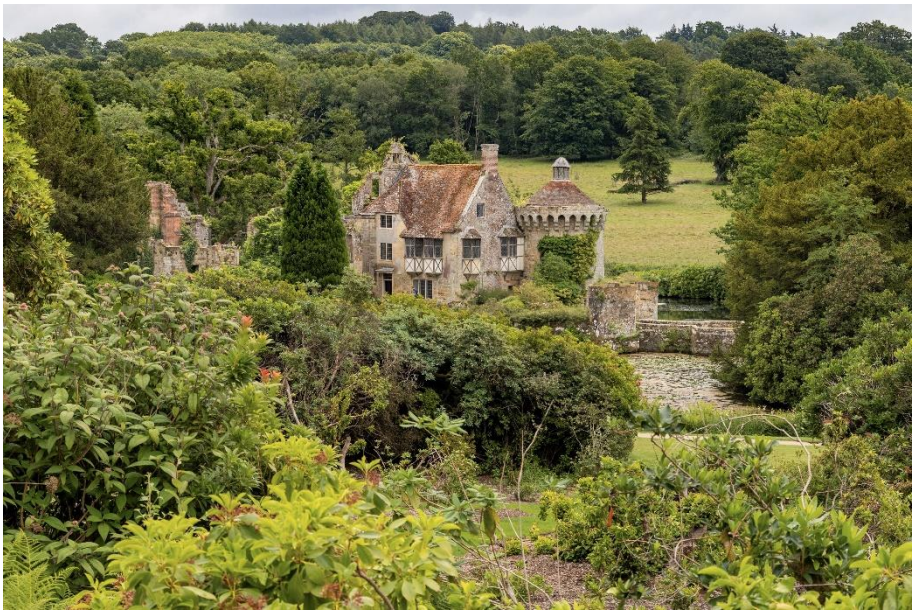
After we'd wandered happily around the grounds and acquainted ourselves with the layout, our allotted time-slot to enter the house seemed to arrive quite quickly. I confess I wasn't anticipating all that much of interest because I love old castles and gardens best, but the house proved well worth a visit.

The original Scotney Castle and its estate had been purchased by Edward Hussey in 1778, but by the early 19th century, his grandson, also named Edward, had the current mansion house built. It was designed by Anthony Salvin, with the old castle being partially destroyed to make an attractive garden feature. Seriously? Deliberately destroying an ancient building for a *garden feature*!

Moving incredulously on, the new house is an early example of the Tudor Revival architectural style that became popular in 19th-century Britain. Almost as soon as we stepped inside, it felt as if the last occupants had not long left and the first guide we encountered in the library was eager to point out objects of interest, such as secret compartments amongst the books and a fuddling cup. This was a strange drinking vessel made of three separate jugs that would spill its contents unless the drinker worked out the correct order in which to drink. Bizarre.

The library contents had been assembled since the 17th century, mostly by Edward Hussey III (1807-94) and his grandson Christopher (1899-1970). The furniture, ceramics and objets d'art are displayed as left in 2006 by Christopher's widow. All of that, together with the books, adds up to 10,000+ objects, comprising the largest National Trust collection in the south-east of England.

When our tour of the house had come to an end, we wandered down to the moated castle ruin, with each turn of the path offering a picturesque view. The sky was still boringly white and overcast, so our photos weren't going to be the best they could be, but it was still incredibly pretty.

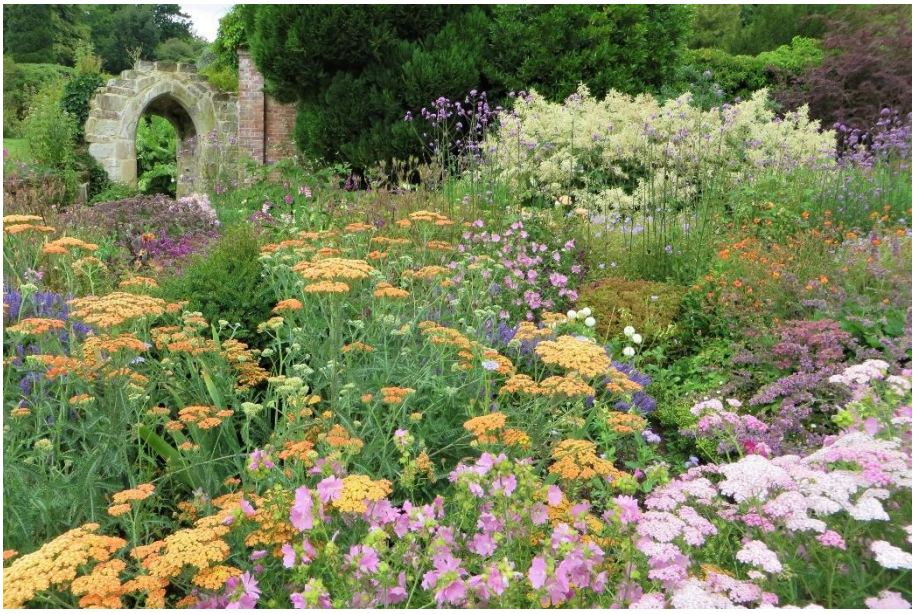


A pretty castle ruin (photo by Alan Santillo)

There was a great deal of greenery on our approach, down and along paths amid verdant naturalistic planting of rhododendrons and azaleas, which must be a splendid sight when in flower. The sight of the old castle ruins in the centre of this landscape created an almost fairy-tale atmosphere.

Once we'd arrived at the level of the castle, there was a delightful garden that was small, but filled with a colourful array of herbaceous planting. Flowers against a backdrop of castle ruins look so good. It was just a pity about the sky.

The old castle walls, adorned with wisteria and old English roses in summer, must have witnessed so much history. The earliest records of the site go back to 1137, when the estate was owned by Lambert de Scoteni, from whom the name Scotney derives. Records indicate a high-status house was then in existence, which passed to the Ashburnham family in 1358.

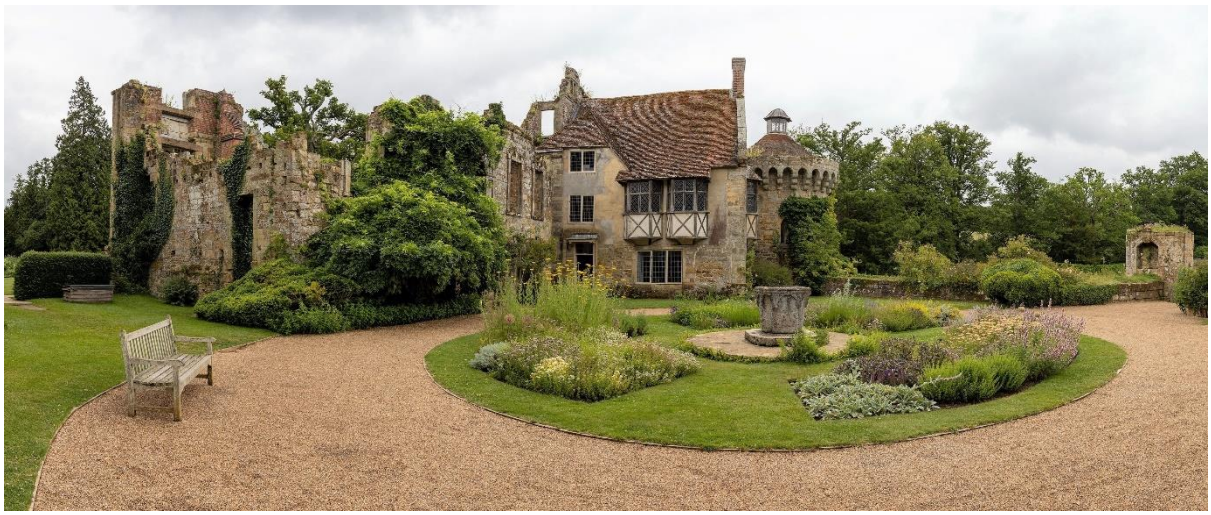


Colourful garden (showing minimal sky)

About 20 years later, the risk of French invasion during the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) led to fortification of the site and the consequent building of Scotney Castle, credited to Roger Ashburnham. As is fairly common with medieval dual-purpose buildings, debate exists about the effectiveness of its low-level defences and some historians think the castle was probably more of a status symbol.

It was roughly rectangular in shape, with circular towers at each corner. No licence to crenellate has ever been found for Scotney Castle, although possibly such a formality was overlooked in an emergency situation like the threat of French invasion. In fact, it's unknown if the castle was ever fully completed.

Evidence was found in a will of a Darrell family member who died in 1558, giving exact information of the accommodation arrangements and suggesting that only the south tower survived at that time. There is also no documented evidence to suggest that Scotney Castle ever sustained serious damage or demolition, but the fact that an arched entrance to the western tower still exists, implies that this must have been completed to some measure.



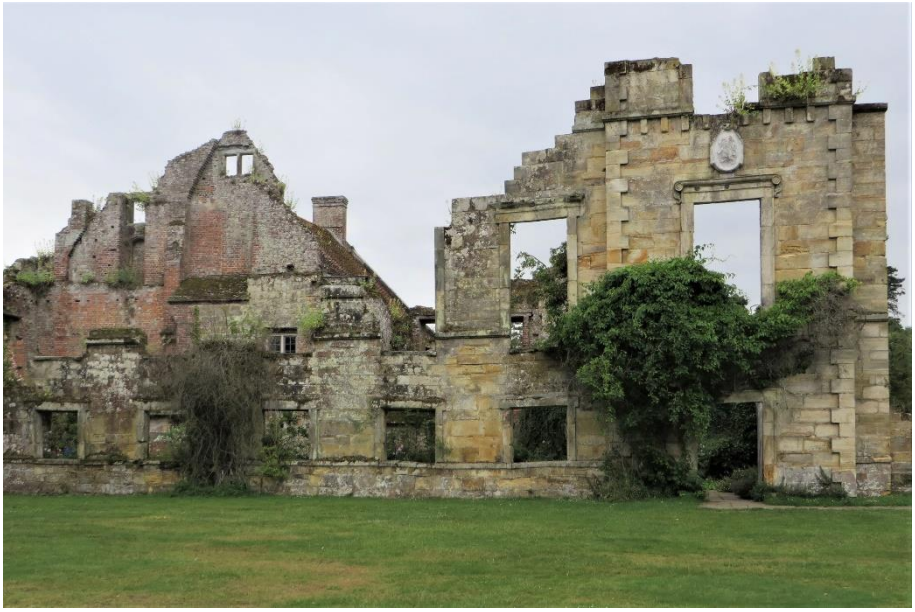
Scotney Old Castle with garden (photo by Alan Santillo)

There were still some intact rooms in the castle, so we naturally investigated. In 1580, the south wing adjoining the tower was rebuilt in the Elizabethan style – that is, part brick and part stone with projecting timber framed upper-storey leaded lights. This building contained a good-quality wooden staircase built in around 1378 and far more excitingly, several well-hidden priest holes.

From 1591-1598, during the reign of Protestant Queen Elizabeth I, Scotney Castle had been the secret hiding place of the well-known Jesuit, Father Richard Blount. The property was owned at that time by Thomas Darrell, who risked his life (and probably the life of others) for the Roman Catholic cause, by enabling Father Blount to administer to local Roman Catholics. In one room, we were able to view the hidden priest-hole inside a cupboard. This had served him well until he was betrayed and local Justices of the Peace raided the castle searching for him.

The castle was actually raided on two occasions. The first attempt lasted a week, until Blount's companion gave himself up. The second attempt took ten days, with Blount managing to escape, thanks to Bray, his manservant. This enterprising and probably desperate man created a diversion by raising a false alarm that thieves were stealing horses from the stable. Blount thus had the chance to climb over the wall and plunge into the icy moat. He made it to land where Bray was waiting and the fortunate pair escaped.

In 1630, the eastern range was rebuilt in the style of the notable architect, Inigo Jones, resulting in a three-storey structure that dwarfed the surviving medieval and Elizabethan structures. After more than 200 years, it was partly dismantled when the new house was finished in 1843, leaving only the most interesting features. The old castle buildings were thus used as a romantic addition to the garden. The Elizabethan wing, however, remained a bailiff's residence until 1905.



Sad remains (photo by Alan Santillo)

The Darrell family had owned the estate for around 350 years, after which it had been purchased by Edward Hussey. In another of the remaining intact rooms was an account of the Hussey family's history. They had made their money from the iron industry in Worcestershire and had moved to Sussex in the early 1700s.

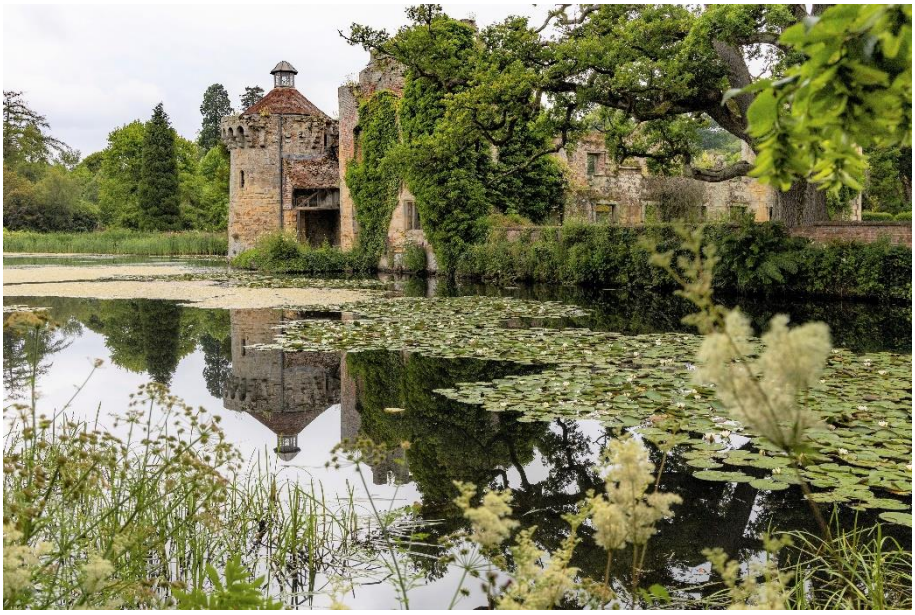
Edward Hussey had sadly taken his own life at the castle in 1816, when the property passed to his son, also called Edward. He unfortunately died a year later in London following a long illness, whereupon his wife chose not to use Scotney as the family's main home. By 1828 however, her son, also Edward, became involved in the estate again and decided to build the new house.

All things considered, I had more understanding of why the old castle had been abandoned in favour of the new house – but to plunder and destroy part of it and render it no more than a fashionable folly? What folly! I felt sad that the only substantial remains of the old castle were the four piers of the gatehouse entrance and the circular tower in the southern corner.

It was true, however, that there were still some decent reminders of the past to bring the remaining rooms to life, so all was not lost. In the case of the old wooden staircase, for instance, it was perfectly possible to imagine people from previous generations touching its well-carved posts as they went about their daily lives. The story of Father Blount also added a significant sense of drama and there was no doubt that the whole place was full of spirit and appeal.

After wandering up to the café at midday for some lunch, we found ourselves drawn back down to the old castle again for further investigation and a quiet wander around the moat. In fact, the gardens themselves are a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest. The Quarry Garden was created from the resulting hollow left after sandstone had been taken for the new house from the hillside below. Unexpectedly, it contains an impression of an iguanodon's footprint left 100 million years before – an impressively ancient site.

The weather forecast had promised the clouds would lift, so we walked around expectantly in the light drizzle for a while. The grounds are a great place to explore – when it's dry. There are 780 acres belonging to the estate, testament of a long and varied history. The views with their reflections and various greenery complementing the old castle would have been stunning on a day with blue sky and fluffy white clouds. Alas, it was not to be and we could only imagine…



Imagine with a blue sky… (photo by Alan Santillo)

The parkland is grade 1 listed, filled with wonderful old trees which played their part in the story of the old castle that had once been home to living human beings for hundreds of years. Every few steps we took seemed to offer a slightly different aspect of the view. It wasn't at all hard to imagine how the castle grounds have been the venue for Shakespeare productions – in particular *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with actors appearing on cue from behind the bushes!

Covering 300 acres, the Scotney woodlands are very characteristic of the Weald, which is an area of south-east England between the chalk escarpments of the North and South Downs. The Weald was once covered with forest and its Old-English name refers to 'woodland'.

Such a historic landscape is connected with old English traditions such as charcoal production, wood-pasture and the once profitable hop industry common in the south-east. In fact, the Scotney estate is still home to a tenant farmer, who grows, picks and dries hops at Little Scotney Farm. One of the first sights that had caught my eye on entering Scotney Castle had been a sculpture by Simon Conolly, depicting a family of hop pickers:

Family of Hop Pickers

Wildlife naturally plays a part in this essentially rural landscape. A herd of Sussex cattle has been a feature of the estate since Victorian times and sheep have been grazing on the verdant land even longer. Sadly, though, the drizzle failed to disappear and we reluctantly called it a day, not having seen all that was on offer. It had been a castle experience with a difference, but well worth a visit. There is a faintly sad atmosphere that seems to pull at the heartstrings and ask to be validated – which is rather fanciful, but for me simply added to the pleasure.