

## DORSET 2023

### **Friday 21<sup>st</sup> July**

Dorset must be a favourite place of ours (it is), because it was our fourth holiday in this quietly astonishing county. This time we had the added delight of staying in a thatched cottage on the Athelhampton estate with our daughter Rachel and granddaughter Léa. River Cottage had been modernised and refurbished in 2009 and it was carbon-neutral, having been adapted in 2021 with ground-source heating and hot water, plus solar electricity. What was there not to love?

Firstly, though, Alan and I visited Montacute House in Somerset on our way there. We'd visited this late-Elizabethan three-storey mansion once before in 2017, when the weather had generally been disobliging for good enough photos. Although the sky was a little on the capricious side today, there was much more scope.

The mansion had been built between 1598-1601 on a grand scale, using locally quarried hamstone. With its design in Gothic roots, it was considered to be a masterpiece of Elizabethan Renaissance architecture, although the actual architect is uncertain. Certainly, with its large number of tall glass windows and surrounding garden and parkland, it was clearly designed to be a symbol of wealth and power.

It was commissioned by Sir Edward Phelips, who made his fortune as a lawyer and then followed a political career, by entering Parliament in 1584. He was Speaker of the House of Commons from 1604-11, before being promoted to Master of the Rolls. His claim to fame was making the opening statement for the prosecution in the trial of Guy Fawkes and his fellow gunpowder plotters.



**Montacute House**

After a cappuccino in the courtyard café, we strolled around the East Court garden by the entrance to the house, before walking around the other side of the house to the west drive, where we admired the avenue of clipped Lebanon cedars, Irish yew trees, limes and oaks. The impressively long and straight avenue led down to the west gates in the distance, but I was anxious to have a second attempt (the first failed in 2017) at taking photos of the famous wibbly wobbly hedges.

These hedges of English yew are presumed to be about 150 years old and were straight until 1947, but the prolonged heavy snow of that winter caused their flat tops to collapse under the weight and not bounce back as normally would happen. It was decided that the quiriness of their appearance was to be embraced and nowadays cutting the wibbly wobbly hedges take two people ten days to complete, with platform scaffolding, hedge cutters and a cherry picker to reach the top – which however you look at it, is impressive – and worth a photo:



**Wibbly wobbly hedges and a blue sky**

Rather than heading to the ice house, we decided to head back to the café instead, to beat any queues for lunch. It paid off and after a relaxing half hour or so, we went to look around the house. I particularly liked the Great Hall, which had an atmosphere of well-kept old grandeur, with wood panelling and wooden furniture, portraits, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century plasterwork frieze depicting a henpecked husband and the prestige of being one of the locations where scenes from *Wolf Hall* were filmed.



**The Great Hall** (photo by Alan Santillo)



**The Great Hall with frieze** (photo by Alan Santillo)

In the 2015 television serial of *Wolf Hall* (which I greatly enjoyed), Montacute represented Greenwich Palace, King Henry VIII's main London residence and the site of Anne Boleyn's arrest. Montacute's striking grounds provided a picturesque backdrop for jousting scenes, including the colourful royal tent.

The Crimson Bedroom also featured – thus named because it had once been the drawing room, decorated with crimson wallpaper in the 1800s. I particularly admired the chest in this room, as I do love a spectacular old chest:



**The (un)Crimson Bedroom** (photo by Alan Santillo)

The esteemed founder of Montacute House, Sir Edward Phelips, died in 1614 and was succeeded by his son, Robert, who also had a successful career in Parliament. However, Robert Phelips managed to have himself arrested at Montacute and imprisoned in the Tower of London for almost seven months before being released. As a staunch Protestant, he was opposed to the 'Spanish Match', which was a proposed marriage between Prince Charles, the son of King James I and Infanta Maria Anna of Spain, the daughter of King Philip III of Spain. Negotiations failed...

Following generations led a more peaceful existence as country gentry until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Montacute was inherited by William Phelips, who started out well by making many renovations and improvements, including transforming the Great Chamber into a library, with an eminently pleasing doorway:



**An eminently pleasing doorway** (photo by Alan Santillo)

However, William sadly lost the plot, as he became an addicted gambler and ended up being incarcerated 'for his own good'. This was unfortunately after the family fortune and huge areas of the Montacute estate had been gambled away. His son, William, took control of the estate in 1875, but despite selling the family artworks and silver, the family was forced to move out and let the house, never to return.

One tenant was Lord Curzon, who lived there with his mistress Elinor Glyn, author of romantic fiction considered scandalous for its time. Finally, after being on the market for two years, the house was sold in 1931 to philanthropist Ernest Cook. He gave it to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, who passed it to the National Trust. During World War II, it was requisitioned by the army, with American soldiers billeted in surrounding parkland before the Normandy landings. Nowadays it has found its niche, all thanks to the National Trust.

After enjoying our tour of the house, we wandered further into the cedar lawn area, before deciding it was time to continue our way to River Cottage. For a holiday in Dorset, it had been a most pleasant start in Somerset. En route we stopped at Dorchester's *Tesco* for some essentials, before arriving in the car park of Athelhampton House, along the road from Puddletown.

River Cottage itself was close by with its own driveway, accessed through a gate and across a small bridge (over the River Piddle) and looking very picturesque with its thatched roof. Unused at first to older dwellings like this, it seemed dark inside, but we soon became accustomed to its comfortably modernised 'oldness' and set about unpacking. After some confusion about bedrooms, which involved Facetiming Rachel, who would be arriving the following day, we sorted ourselves out and settled down for an easy teatime and a relaxed evening.



**The comfortable four-poster bed**

*Day 1 rating: 8/10, Montacute House was good – I mean, Wolf Hall! 😊*

### **Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> July**

I hadn't slept well, although I don't think the four-poster bed had anything to do with it, more my own inability to relax. I was looking forward to the arrival of Rachel and Léa mid-afternoon, but the weather wasn't playing the game and much rain was forecast. However, it hadn't materialised by 10:00 when Athelhampton House opened to the public, so we took advantage of our free entry that came with the rental of the cottage and walked the short distance to the entrance.

Athelhampton is regarded as one of England's finest Tudor manors, its roots going back to before the Norman invasion of 1066, when Æthelric was a medieval bishop of Dorchester. He died in 1034 and by the time of the Domesday Book in 1086, the manor, then called Pidele, was held by the Bishop of Salisbury, with an odd bod (who may or may not have been bold) named Odbold as tenant.

The name of *Aethelhelm* appears in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when the manor belonged to the de Loundres family. In around 1350, Sir Richard Martyn married the de Pydele heiress, after which the Martyns and their descendants became Lords of Athelhampton for the following 250 years. In the meantime, in slight dampness we explored the gardens, originally designed by Inigo Thomas in the 1890s.



**A slightly damp garden**

I was surprised at first to discover that the 20 acres or so of gardens are Grade 1 listed on the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens, although as we walked around, hoods up and hoods down as the rain failed to make up its mind, it became apparent how special they are even today. I was also intrigued to come across the site of where a Norman church had once stood in the grounds until 1862. I looked forward to seeing the gardens in better weather, particularly one evening when the owners were absent and we were allowed to access the gardens after hours.

As it was lunchtime, we returned to River Cottage for some food, before the arrival of Rachel and Léa, who had encountered the forecast torrents of rain and driven through a Puddletown that lived up to its name with puddles galore.

After they'd unpacked and we'd drunk tea and sampled an excellent piece of cake made by Léa (with Rachel's help), we girded our loins and drove to Dorchester's Tesco. It was crowded and the car park was beset by puddles, so we were glad to return to River Cottage and relax. Thankfully, the next day's forecast was good.

*Day 2 rating: 7/10 – wonderful to see Rachel and Léa, but not the rain.*

### **Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> July**

Since the weather forecast was right, we set out this morning for Poole harbour and the ferry to Brownsea Island, complete with a packed lunch and high hopes on my part for actually seeing a red squirrel this time. Our visit to Brownsea Island last year had yielded a red squirrel count of zero, only made worse by a friend's later visit yielding "lots". Rachel asked me why I wanted to see a red squirrel and all I could reply was that they were the indigenous species and it wasn't fair that they had been decimated by the incoming grey squirrels. Also, they're so cute.

Alan drove to Poole and after navigating a tricky road system to the multi-storey car park, we walked to the harbour front and almost straight away were able to board the 10:30 ferry for a 20-minute trip to the island. It felt quite exciting to step once again onto Brownsea soil, with the promise of a sighting and the pleasure of a blue sky with fluffy white clouds as we looked forward to our walk amid the trees. First of all, though, we took advantage of the café, where chatty Alan found out that the squirrels tend to like the area behind the church.



**Walking amid the trees**

Although the church wasn't all that far away and we had two maps between us, I'm not entirely sure how we somehow ended up on another path. However, it was such a fair day and our spirits were riding high as we walked happily and fairly briskly through both coniferous and deciduous woodland, all clearly being looked after very well indeed, with ongoing conservation work.

After a while of idyllic perambulation, we saw the Scout Stone, commemorating Robert Baden-Powell's first experimental Scout camp of 1907 held on the island:



**Three non-Scouts at the Scout Stone**

We proceeded on our uplifting way, still without any red squirrel sightings, but happy to be in the clear, pine-scented air amongst the uplifting surroundings. In some places, heather added to the overall natural beauty:



**Heather gracing the scene**

As we changed direction, the wind became a feature and looking out at a number of yachts on the water, one of them began to heel over and then capsized. We stayed and watched for a short while, as a rescue boat came along to help. The yacht was soon righted and continued on its way. The drama was safely over.



**The windy side of the island**

It was sometime after this when we were traversing a more inland area that Alan stopped and uttered the magic word, "Squirrel!" I excitedly looked at where he was pointing, only to catch a glimpse of a disappearing squirrel tail, that looked strangely white, as it made a beeline (squirrel-line?) into the undergrowth. It must have hared (squirreled?) up into the trees, where Alan and Rachel were pointing.

"It's in the tree!" they both said, still pointing.  
"What tree?" I asked desperately.  
"That tree! Up there, in between those two trees ... oh, it's gone."

So that was it, my squirrel experience was over. I had at least seen a disappearing tail, which was progress on last year's nothing, but it was frustrating more than anything. I pinned my hopes on the likely area behind the church, as we sought a pleasant place where we could eat our packed lunch.

We found a wooden bench by a small beach area looking out at Poole harbour and enjoyed a pleasant 20 minutes or so watching butterflies and the Condor ferry. Léa went for a small nearby wander while we packed up and then all set off back towards the church area. On our way, we met a guide who said he had seen a red squirrel with white in its tail, which was very unusual (but didn't exactly help).

Noticeably more people had arrived and I realised that the subsequent noise was very likely to deter any squirrels from making an appearance. I was right and even though Alan and I stood still in the area behind the church and gazed upwards scrutinising the trees, there was no sign. Another man was doing exactly the same, so we hopefully didn't look too mad. Rachel and Léa had left us to it and gone to investigate the church, but by the time they came back, it was obvious the squirrels were hiding. They were probably waiting until all the annoying visitors had gone home and to be honest, who could blame them?

We only had about five minutes to wait for the ferry back to Poole and were soon walking around the shops there, as Léa had recently had a growth spurt and needed some longer leggings! It was then back to River Cottage for a mug of tea and some holiday playing of games together. I particularly enjoyed *Brainbox* (the world, history and Harry Potter) although I was anything but a brainbox...

The weather was still fine after we'd eaten, so we decided to take advantage of our after-hours freedom of Athelhampton gardens. Alan had been told of a way into the gardens and by about 7 pm, we were enjoying a serene wander:



**A beautiful evening in a beautiful garden – the Coruna**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Inigo Thomas had designed the gardens as a series of outdoor rooms, which fulfilled his vision that the house and the garden should reflect one another in a harmonious whole. It worked for me and added a lot of interest as we entered different areas. The particularly pleasing circular Coruna garden (above) with its stone wall topped by obelisks was intended as a space for flowers and also to give access to four other garden areas, all amid well-tended hedges, trees, borders, water features – in fact, all a good garden entails.



**Yew tree pyramids in the Great Court**

There were many pleasing views, including one through an archway, across the Private Garden lily pond to the east façade of the house. It became apparent that Léa wasn't too keen on the several ponds we came across, but at the same time she was amused that the River Piddle fed into the water system.



**Bridge over the River Piddle**

The main core of Inigo Thomas's design is the same today, with some extensions added. On our first slightly damp walk around the grounds the day before, Alan and I had admired the kitchen garden with its apple pergola and exploring the dovecote area. It was no real surprise that in 1997, Athelhampton Garden had won the Historic Houses Association garden of the year award.



**Evening cloud at Athelhampton House** (photo by Alan Santillo)

We wandered back happily to River Cottage, feeling it had been a real privilege to have the gardens to ourselves. A usual evening of desultory television viewing followed, planning the next day with its forecast of showers. Goodnight!

*Day 3 rating: 9/10 – it may have been 10/10 if I'd seen a whole red squirrel!*

### **Monday 24<sup>th</sup> July**

The morning presented us with weather that wasn't too bad when we set out for Weymouth and the sand sculptures at Sandworld in Lodmoor Country Park. It was overcast and rained while we were inside Sandworld, but we all had a good time gazing at the amazing sand creations, with this year's theme being science-fiction.



**Dr Who?**

Léa had a quiz to complete and we had a cappuccino in the small café there, so we were sorted. We walked around twice in the end and as we did so, I realised that two of my favourite sci-fi programmes from the dim and distant past were there – *Dr Who* and the original *Star Trek*. I also realised I had watched the first episode of both series. I found the *Star Trek* sculpture interesting because it was part unfinished and therefore showed how the characters took form.



**Star Trek in progress**

It had stopped raining by the time we left Sandworld, so we walked to the seafront area and came upon a handy Wetherspoon's for some lunch. This accomplished, we went to pay homage to the famous Jubilee Clock Tower:



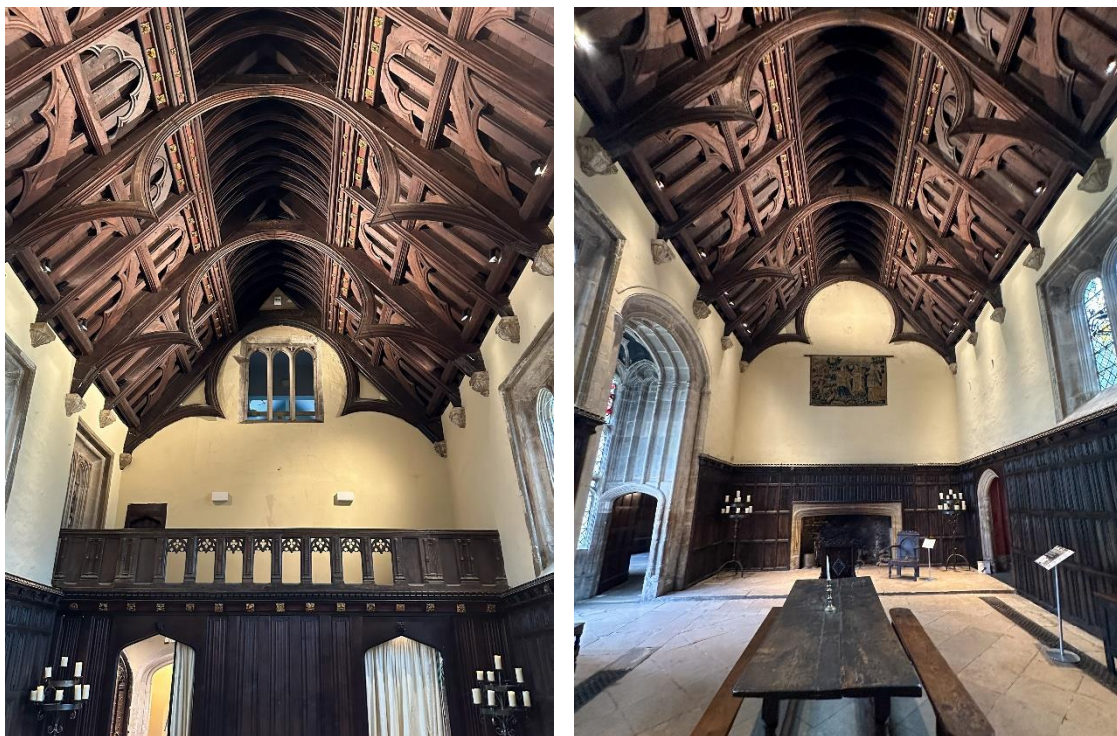
**Jubilee Clock Tower**

This wrought- and cast-iron stalwart, set on its base of Portland stone, had been erected in 1888 for the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria. Rachel for some unknown reason had taken a huge fancy to this clock tower on our first visit to Dorset in 1987 – Léa enjoyed hearing the story, but seemed somewhat underwhelmed!

Our plan for the afternoon was to return to River Cottage for a lazy mid-afternoon break, before going to pay a free visit inside Athelhampton House. We were all quite excited and weren't in the slightest bit disappointed, as to my mind it was on a par with such beauties as Hever Castle. The staff were exceptionally friendly, although we were happy to wander around in our own time and space.

Returning to the history, Sir William Martyn, a collector of wine duty at Poole, built Athelhampton Hall in about 1485. He was given a licence to enclose 160 acres of deer park and also was given permission to fortify his manor with stone and lime, adding towers with crenellations. The Great Hall was very likely built over an older dwelling and has stayed relatively unchanged, with a magnificent hammer-beam roof, stained glass, carved stonework and many other features.

The roof deserves a special mention, intriguing because it was constructed to keep its strength by following the grain of the wood and was therefore not straight. It didn't matter, since it was a spectacular roof, exuding a tangible sense of history.



**The Great Hall in both directions** (photos by Alan Santillo)

In 1494, Sir William married Isabel Faringdon and they had two children, in 1495 and 1497, but Isabel died a year later at the age of 28. William later remarried and had three more children with his second wife, Christina.

In the Tudor part of the house, the marriage chamber and chapel were very touching, considering Isabel's early demise. Adjoining the chamber was a small chapel where Isabel could pray for the safe arrival of her expected children.



**The Tudor marriage chamber (chapel far right)**  
(photo by Alan Santillo)



**The chapel**

In the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, living standards placed more emphasis on domestication. In response, Sir William Martyn's grandson, Robert Martyn, built the west wing in an oblique angle to the older building, to accommodate cooking, eating, living and sleeping quarters. He also added a gatehouse that was demolished in 1862.

Robert had married Elizabeth Kelway, but it turned out that their son Nicholas was the last of the Martyn male line when he died in 1595. Thereafter, four Martyn daughters inherited equal shares of the estate and although this was a very fair deal, it led to a decidedly complicated history of inheritance.

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the shares of the three elder daughters were combined to form one unit that represented three-quarters of the house and park, while the other quarter-share remained separate until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

The elder daughter married Henry Brune and in 1661, Mary Brune (the great-granddaughter of Henry Brune) married Sir Ralph Bankes of Corfe Castle – a pleasing local connection there. A not so pleasing connection for further owners of Athelhampton developed in the late 1660s, when three shares of the house were sold to Sir Robert Long, whose grandson James was a gambler and in 1683 only managed to avoid losing Athelhampton to creditors by hiding in the house.

A later James Long (Sir James, 5<sup>th</sup> Baronet) inherited Athelhampton in 1710, after which the estate was let to tenant farmers, who were responsible for around 12,000 acres. It became the heart of a thriving community, but as the house was passed down through the generations, it fell into disrepair until in 1825 it was inherited by William Pole-Tydney-Long-Wellesley. Call me cynical, but a quadruple-barrelled name seems like ostentatious overkill. Maybe it even led to his reputation as a nobleman who became notorious for his dissipated lifestyle?

Be that as it may (and trying not to be judgemental), he sold his three-quarter share of Athelhampton in 1848 to tenant farmer George Wood, who managed to purchase the fourth share and thus unite the estate. George must have done very well for himself, as he had a new church built at Athelhampton, with the architect employing the renowned author Thomas Hardy no less. George's nephew later inherited the estate and although he decided to retain surrounding farmland, he sold Athelhampton in 1890 to the antiquarian Alfred Cart de Lafontaine.

Alfred set about restoring the house, extensively decorating it and even adding a new turret to the east front in the interests of symmetry. It was he who engaged Inigo Thomas (an architect and writer as well as a landscape designer), who brought in over 40,000 tons of hamstone to create the wonderful gardens seen today. Interestingly, most of his garden commissions came from new owners of Tudor houses, who wanted gardens to complement the complete Tudor ambience.



**Evening stroll in the gardens** (photo by Alan Santillo)

Cart de Lafontaine became a magistrate in Dorchester and frequently entertained Thomas Hardy. In fact, Thomas's description of Bathsheba's farmhouse in *Far from the Madding Crowd* closely resembles Athelhampton, while other works of Hardy, including a short story and poems (one of which is named *The Dame of Athelhall*) are obvious links. However, Cart de Lafontaine was never entirely satisfied with his changes to Athelhampton and when his nephew and heir was killed in World War I, he sold Athelhampton to George Cochrane in 1918.

Cochrane had the north wing built in 1920-1, on the site of earlier structures, but when his wife died in 1929, he put the house up for sale. It was purchased by Lord Rothermere for his estranged daughter-in-law, Margaret Harmsworth, whose famous visitors included Noel Coward and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. It was modernised in 1932 by the installation of electricity, but changed hands once again when Margaret married Sir John Blunt in 1947 and left Athelhampton a year later.

The next owner was Rodney Phillips, who lived at Athelhampton with his wife Marika and mother-in-law Mareyna, a Russian-French painter who produced several paintings of Athelhampton. When Rodney and Marika separated in 1957, Athelhampton was acquired by Victor Robert Cooke, a retired surgeon from Bristol. Next to take over was his son Robert and then Robert's son, Patrick. The Cooke family undertook much restoration work and extended the gardens, opening the house and gardens to the public for the first time.

In 2019, Patrick Cooke retired and sold the house to economist and author Giles Keating, who undertook further restoration. The transformation of the Elizabethan kitchen, with its range that had been bricked in and hidden behind kitchen units, had revealed a massive brick arch, with serving hatches and bread ovens. A wrought-iron spit was added to one of the oldest kitchens in continuous use in the country, along with other kitchen equipment reminiscent of the Elizabethan era.



**The restored Elizabethan kitchen** (photo by Alan Santillo)

The restoration had included work in Purbeck marble on the stone floor, as well as strengthening the kitchen's structure. It had been opened to the public in 2022 and pleasingly, many other rooms once closed to the public were now open.

We were all fascinated with our exploration of this quietly amazing house, so much so that Léa expressed a wish to pay a second visit on another day. For the moment, though, we were happy to return to River Cottage and enjoy a holiday-type late afternoon and evening, looking forward to decent weather the next day.

*Day 4 rating: 8/10 – the Weymouth weather left a little to be desired.*

### **Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> July**

It was undeniably uplifting to see the sun shining this morning, for our planned visit to Sherborne Castle, a drive of around 40 minutes. Although we weren't quite sure what to expect, all four of us love a castle, so our spirits were high – and remained that way when we arrived, paid our entrance fee and walked towards the castle, past the stables that are now the estate office and on towards the unmissable, 50-acre lake, which was a favourite meeting place of many ducks.

We had a timed ticket for a guided tour of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century castle, sometimes referred to as Sherborne New Castle, because the ruins of an earlier 12<sup>th</sup>-century castle are situated within the 'new' castle's grounds, looked after by English Heritage. Since we had time to spare, we continued on a path that ran alongside the East Lawn. Luckily, the sky was rapidly becoming ever more blue, as we now looked back to the castle, perfectly enhanced by its beautiful landscape.



**Beautiful landscape enhancing the castle view**

The landscape was the work of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (c.1715/6-1783), the highly-esteemed English gardener and landscape architect. It was easy to appreciate his creative talent, as we gazed across the huge 42-acre expanse of the grounds. The whole view was breathtaking to behold, stretching away into the distance with immensely pleasing dimensions, enhanced by the clear weather.

Léa had been given a quiz sheet, but it would have taken a while to reach the outlying clues, so we stayed not far from the castle. At one point, deer could be seen far away. There was a lot on offer, including a fossil house, a cascade, a sunken garden, Raleigh's seat, an orangery and a gingko lawn, but for the present we investigated the boat house pier and looked across at the old castle.



**Sherborne Old Castle in the distance** (photo by Alan Santillo)

We took advantage of the nearby garden, in which to sit and eat an early packed lunch, so we would be in time for our tour. On approaching the castle, we were greeted by a pleasant young man who politely showed us where to congregate. There were only around 10-12 of us, so it wasn't overcrowded as we were shown into the library – by the pleasant young man as it happened, who was our guide.

As ever, I was interested in the castle's history, built by Sir Walter Raleigh and the home of the Digby family since 1617. The esteemed Sir Walter had passed through Sherborne on his way to Plymouth, falling in love with the old castle. Queen Elizabeth I (reign 1558-1603) leased the estate to Sir Walter, who decided to build a new house for short-stay visits, rather than refurbishing the castle. The four-storey rectangular building known as Sherborne Lodge was completed in 1594. It had four corner turrets and a disguised entrance in one of the towers, so the symmetry of the façade was unspoiled, centred on its rectangular forecourt.



**Sherborne New Castle** (photo by Alan Santillo)

With the accession of King James I (reign 1603-25), the now not so esteemed Sir Walter was implicated in a conspiracy, charged with treason and thrown into the Tower of London for 13 years. The king leased the Sherborne estate to Robert Carr and then sold it in 1617 to Sir John Digby, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Bristol. The Digby family added four wings to Sherborne Lodge in the 1620s, similar in style to the original, thus creating the mansion now known as Sherborne (New) Castle.

George Digby, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Bristol, was a politician and peer who was a Royalist supporter during the English Civil War (1642-51). His career could be described as colourful, although his ambition and a somewhat unstable character caused problems to himself and the two kings (Charles I and Charles II) that he served.

Sherborne was a strong Royalist area and its fortified old castle became a powerful Royalist base that saw some violent fighting. Sir Oliver Cromwell described it as "malicious and mischievous", which are curious adjectives for a castle. It survived two sieges, but finally fell to the Parliamentarians in 1645 and was slighted, or laid to ruin, in order to prevent further use. I would like to visit one day...

As for the new Sherborne Castle, its successive owners had successfully been keeping up appearances over the years and modernising the mansion with such items as panelled doors, white marble fireplaces and Georgian sash windows. Speaking of King George III (reign 1760-1820), he had visited the house after an extension had been added to the building's west side in 1789. The visit was clearly a success, as shortly afterwards he granted a peerage to Henry, 7<sup>th</sup> Lord Digby.

When Edward, 8<sup>th</sup> Lord Digby, died in 1856 with no heir, Sherborne Castle was inherited by his nephew George, who was the son of Lady Charlotte Digby and William Wingfield. A royal licence was granted for him to bear the name and arms of Digby and so he became the first Wingfield Digby owner, with the mansion being modernised by the architect Philip Charles Hardwick.

As with many large homes, it was used as a Red Cross hospital in World War I and was headquarters for commandos involved in D-Day landings in World War II.



**View from an inside window** (photo by Alan Santillo)

As our tour began, I was really intrigued to see how over 400 years of decorative styles were reflected in this historical building. Since no photo-taking was allowed, except looking out from some of the windows (as the above photo), I'm not quite clear of the order of the rooms we viewed, but they were all tastefully decorated.

I do remember the solarium had been the great parlour in Sir Walter Raleigh's time, where he received visitors, where the plaster ceiling is still graced by the Tudor rose amid oak leaves and acorns. The room had been remodelled in 1859, when it was panelled in Austrian oak and had a marble fireplace installed, complete with the Digby motto: *Deo, non Fortuna – By God, not by Chance*. In Victorian times, it had been used as the dining room and was a pleasant room indeed.

There was a red drawing room, a green drawing room and a blue drawing room, all beautifully furnished and hung with many significant paintings. Our guide told us many fascinating snippets of information that brought the whole place to life. Léa and a few other children seemed quite happy to look all around and listen to what was being said, which is a sure sign of a good guide.

Other memorable rooms were the library, the hall, the oak room and the family album room. Someone asked if there were secret passages, to which the guide replied that if he showed us where they were, they would no longer be secret! I think most people were satisfied with what they had seen and heard by the time we were set free to peruse the family museum, where there were a great many curios, including fossils, firearms and Lord Digby's false teeth...

Once we were outside again in fine, bright weather, we decided to follow a rather verdant path that we thought may lead to the old castle. It took us past Raleigh's seat, Pope's seat and the cascade, where there were excellent views of Sherborne New Castle and the boathouse down at the edge of the lake:



**Across the lake to the mansion and boathouse** (photo by Alan Santillo)

Continuing along the path, we came across a folly resembling a castle tower and then further on to where the actual old castle could be viewed behind closed gates. It was tantalising to say the least, although it had been good to have a walk.

By the time we returned to the car park, we were decidedly hot, but since Sherborne Old Castle appeared to be accessible just up the road, we drove and parked to where we thought we could walk to it. There was some confusion about where the castle was hiding, but while Rachel and Léa stayed in the car with a puzzle book, Alan and I walked confidently up one road – then back down it and up another road to where the entrance was – only to find that despite being an English Heritage site, it was only open on Wednesday to Sunday. Foiled again!

It had been a most enjoyable day regardless and the drive back to Athelhampton was uneventful. We relaxed for the rest of the day, even though Léa persuaded us to have a *Brainbox* bonanza, with all three variations. To be fair, we didn't take much persuading! Alan and I ventured out in the back garden after tea for a while, as the sun was still shining and well, we were on holiday...



**Back garden of River Cottage**

*Day 5 rating: 9/10 – it would have been 10/10 if the old castle had been open!*

### **Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> July**

Today the weather was on the capricious side, but our time was running away too quickly. How does this happen? We therefore made ourselves another packed lunch and Rachel drove us to Lyme Regis, where Léa was most desirous of seeing where Mary Anning had lived and carried out her fossil hunting, as well as visiting the fossil museum to view what promised to be some amazing specimens.

Lyme Regis was as popular as ever, with its hilly and often narrow streets, as we walked from the car park (past a tempting private sale of fossils in someone's front garden) down to the museum by the sea front. It was a little too packed with people at times, but the displays themselves were filled with some wonderful specimens. Léa was given a quiz, which was slightly on the difficult side, but we all attempted to help and I certainly learned a few facts myself.

One fascinating specimen was the Charmouth crocodile, found in 2017 and dated to around 190 million years old. It's one of the oldest and most complete early thalattosuchians (a new genus and species of crocodylomorphs) in the world.



**The Charmouth crocodile**

On emerging from the museum, our next objective was the Mary Anning statue, erected quite recently in May 2022. In 2018, a local 11-year-old schoolgirl called Evie had been surprised there was no statue of such an important palaeontologist in her home town and with the help of her mother, set in motion a campaign to put this right. Crowdfunding and no doubt a lot of perseverance made the campaign a success, with a very pleasing result:



**Mary Anning honoured**

Léa declined to have her photo taken by the statue, but later said she had enjoyed her visit to the fossil museum and statue at Lyme Regis, so all was well and it was time to drive to Charmouth, to attempt some fossil hunting ourselves.

We had checked the tide times and knew that if we ate our packed lunch in the car at Charmouth and then headed down to the beach, we would coincide with a recently falling tide. First of all, Rachel had to download a different car parking app to the ones she already had, which wasn't the easiest. Alan and I couldn't help reminiscing about the long departed fossil hunting days at Charmouth we'd had and the ease of paying real money to a real person in the car park...

However, all was accomplished and we walked down to the beach in rather a blustery breeze and moisture-laden air, surprised at the number of people already there. Some were chipping away with hammers at the cliff base, despite notices advising them this was unsafe, as a landslip a little further along proved.

We walked slowly along the shore line, dodging unpredictable incoming waves, our eyes searching for hints of fossils. I soon remembered what an addictive pastime it is, but with a therapeutic quality too, especially when there's a 'find'. Léa soon picked up a piece of belemnite and then another, but there were no ammonite sightings, apart from indents where they had once been.

The rest of us also found some pieces, but the rain was coming in and we decided to finish our fossil foray. It hadn't been a brilliant experience, but it was Léa's first try and she seemed happy enough. The drive back to River Cottage was straightforward, with the rest of the day spent in holiday mode. This included *Brainbox*.

*Day 6 rating: 8/10 – the museum was crowded and the weather wasn't great.*

### **Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> July**

Once again, the weather wasn't the best, but we were determined to make the most of our last day and so Alan drove us to Corfe Castle. It was over an hour's drive away, but having visited last summer, we knew the layout of Corfe, which helped. After parking, we took the path opposite to the steep one we'd climbed the previous year, which offered some different views of the castle's boundaries. Then, once we'd emerged close to the National Trust tea shop, it made perfect sense to go in for a cappuccino and a mid-morning shared cookie (large).



**From the keep down to the outer bailey (photo by Alan Santillo)**

We had been surprised on our first sight of the castle that there was a hazy layer of mist, but this didn't seem to have affected the number of visitors already enjoying the vibrant atmosphere within the grounds. The National Trust had done much to make it of interest to both children and adults, with various activities, information boards, an audio trail telling the story of the castle through the ages and the old favourite, a quiz sheet (with a small prize at the end – very important).

While Rachel and Léa focused on the quiz sheet, Alan and I focused on taking photos of the areas we'd missed on our previous year's visit, which were mostly some of the towers of this post-Norman Conquest castle. After William the Conqueror died in 1087, his son, King Henry I, took eight or so years to build the stone keep, completed in 1105. Standing at 69 feet/21 metres high on top of its 180 feet/55 metres mound, it was a dominant symbol of Norman power that must have stood out for miles around, especially after being whitewashed in 1244.



**A discussion about arrow slits** (photo by Alan Santillo)

In the west bailey, Léa was interested in the history of the Butavant tower, built on the order of King John (reign 1199-1216) with the purpose of imprisoning his nephew Arthur, a rival to the throne. He also took Arthur's sister Eleanor prisoner, along with her 24 knights. Eleanor is believed to have lived comfortably, but her knights were thrown into the oubliette of the tower and largely forgotten.

The more positive side of King John was seen in his luxurious addition to the castle, referred to as the 'gloriette'. This was more or less a pocket palace in the latest architectural style, employing England's finest craftsmen. It was magnificently decorated and had the comfort of an indoor toilet. We became separated in the gloriette area, but once or twice I caught glimpses of Rachel and Léa through windows and archways, as I waited for Alan to finish taking his photos.

The climb to the top of the keep found us in some misty air, but as before, the scale of the castle's destruction as a result of the English Civil War was mind-boggling and showed the castle's indomitable strength. Léa was taken with the history of Lady Bankes and her bravery at 'holding the fort' for the Royalists in the Civil War. She asked many questions, which is the delight of an enquiring mind.



**What did she do?!**

We wended our way downwards, slightly reluctant to leave and therefore diverted by what was on offer. It struck me how the National Trust do a wonderful job at sparking children's interest in the sites they look after and there was also a reward for the completed quiz, too, in the form of a small wooden medallion. I found myself slightly envious that such incentives hadn't existed when I was a child...

To round off our visit, we spent a while in the National Trust shop, before driving back to River Cottage for a slightly late lunch. It didn't matter, as we had a plan, involving a relaxing hour or two, before making a second visit to Athelhampton House. This had been Léa's request, happily endorsed by the rest of us.



**The dining room** (photo by Alan Santillo)

A second visit is generally recommended to take in more detail of what was seen on the first visit, which I'm pretty sure proved right for the four of us. The dining room with its green silk walls looked very inviting with the table laid for a meal and the billiard room was also notable, with a wonderful ceiling. In fact, all the rooms were exceptional in their own way, all beautifully decorated.



**The billiard room** (photo by Alan Santillo)

I particularly loved some of the old wooden doors that must have allowed so many people from ages gone by to pass through them. Some of the locks looked quite ancient, but very well-crafted and all part of the magic of Athelhampton.



**Who has been through this door?**

One of the paintings intrigued me, because of the name of the man it portrayed, Chidioc Tichborne. He was a Roman Catholic who had married a daughter of Nicholas Martyn, from Athelhampton. After visiting Italy during Queen Elizabeth I's Protestant reign, he was arrested for possession of 'Popish relics'. He was released without charge, but in 1586 his family was accused of Popish practices. That same year, Chidioc took part in a plot to murder the queen and was sentenced to death for treason. A sorry end for one with such a titillating name:



**Chidioc Tichborne**

I was also very much drawn to a wonderful chest – an Armada chest, no less:



**The Armada chest**

It was an exceptional and attractive example of an early (late 16<sup>th</sup>-century) model of a transportable safe, made from wrought iron with interlaced bands of the same material. It also has a rare inner lock plate with a mermaid design, which perhaps suggests that the money and valuables stored in the safe came from the sea.

Despite the unsupported notion that Armada chests were from shipwrecks of the Spanish Armada, this chest was probably built in or near Nuremburg in Germany, while the name 'Armada' is applied generally to heavily reinforced strongboxes from around the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Athelhampton chest is only opened on certain occasions, due to the weight of its lid and the danger of it falling on misplaced hands or fingers. However, there is a short *You Tube* video named 'Opening the Armada Chest', which I naturally watched and can confirm it is most impressive.

I was surprised to learn that Athelhampton House is considered one of the most haunted houses in England and featured in an early episode of television's *Most Haunted* series that was said to be 'spine-chilling'. The house felt peaceful and comfortable to me, but the reported sightings are many and varied.

In the case of the wine cellar, though, an audible tapping sound of metal on metal has been heard. William Martyn was the collector of wine duty in Poole, so maybe a frustrated cooper plays out his anger at the unfairness of life by still tapping the barrels. We did hear a loud, continual tapping sound, but it was courtesy of the Athelhampton staff and their sense of humour!



**The wine cellar** (photo by Alan Santillo)

Other unexplained apparitions include two swordsmen in the Great Hall, who have suddenly appeared there in the throes of a sword fight. These two men have never been identified, but always cease fighting when one of them is cut on the arm.

A figure in a dark hooded cloak has been spotted walking along the drive and through the Great Hall, while a soldier has been fleetingly sighted in the gardens. A 'grey lady' has been seen by many owners, staff and guests of Athelhampton, with the current owner seeing her in the early hours of the morning as she passes through walls in bedrooms. This must be somewhat disconcerting.

There was other poltergeist activity in the late 1990s, when doors would slam and lock, drawers would drop out of chests, lights would switch off and beds would be stripped of their covers while still occupied. One door would apparently only unlock when the spirit was asked nicely. Professional assistance was called upon and there have been no further unexplained actions – very intriguing.

Perhaps the most fascinating incident occurred in 2018, when a bride in an 'out of fashion' dress was seen by two visitors. One of them asked Reception staff if there was a wedding taking place and the other visitor said that when she saw the bride in the garden, she didn't go any further because she didn't want to intrude on what she assumed must be a photo shoot taking place. The staff must have been astounded, as there was no wedding, bride or photo shoot that day...

As expected for such a period beauty, Athelhampton has been used on various occasions for filming, but one of the aspects that delights me the most is that in 2021, all reliance on fossil fuels was removed. Solar panels have been installed, with ground and air source heating and battery back-up. This seems an inspiring way to keep historic buildings alive and well, with net zero carbon emissions.

There was no doubt about it, our choice of holiday accommodation had been fabulous, a very memorable location that we had all greatly enjoyed. I confess to feeling a little wistful as we started to pack on our last evening there. However, we made the most of our remaining time together and rounded it off with food, wine, some chilled television viewing and a game or six of *Brainbox* – what else?

*Day 7 rating: 9/10 – Corfe Castle was great and Athelhampton House magnificent.*



**Run for it, she's taking a photo!**

*Overall holiday rating: 9/10 – the weather could have been a little more amenable!*