

MOSTLY HEREFORDSHIRE 2024

Sunday 19th May

Having moved from Cornwall to South Wales five months previously and being inundated with a great deal of necessary work on the house and garden, we felt we needed a week's holiday not too far away and Herefordshire, somewhere we hadn't visited before, seemed ideal. We'd found a self-catering apartment in the small village and civil parish of Preston Wynne, which was suitably rural and quiet. There may have been noisy birds and tractors, but ... it was fairly quiet.

Having arrived the afternoon before during a sudden thunderstorm, we were ready the next morning for some exploring, albeit in a gentle, National Trust kind of way. Brockhampton medieval manor house and estate was a mere 12 miles from us, which was perfect, especially since after a lot of dodgy weather, the sky was a clear blue and the air was calm, inviting and beautifully warm.

On arrival after an uncomplicated drive, there was an immediate sense of times past, as we walked from the car park towards the old moated house, with a pervading feeling of peace. The two main buildings in the near distance looked white, cared-for and unexpectedly picturesque, with a very unusual gatehouse and a compact manor house, which we were both eager to explore.



Brockhampton gatehouse and manor

First of all, though, was a stop at the café in the courtyard for some mid-morning refreshment, which was an excellent start to the visit. This café was actually referred to as a kiosk, but it felt like a café as we sat outside with a cappuccino and cake. On leaving the kiosk/café, we espied the remains of a chapel just across the way and wandered over in the bright sunshine to investigate.

Little is known about the chapel's origins, but it's believed to have been built sometime after 1166. This is backed up by pottery fragments from the beginning of the 13th century, discovered in the chapel's foundation during an archaeological investigation in 2015. The original chapel would have been made of mostly timber and daub, but the only surviving parts are the shallow foundations.



Inside the chapel (photo by Alan Santillo)

Partly hiding in the shadow of bright sunlight in one corner was an octagonal font that had been carved from a single block of stone, dating from the same era.



The 13th-century stone font

It's thought the owners of the newly-built manor house in the early 1400s updated the chapel with local stone, adding the large east window. Excavations indicate the walls were plastered with lime whitewash and stone roof tiles had ceramic green-glazed ridge tops. Earliest records date from 1308 to 1402, after which it probably became a chapel-of-ease for those unable to travel to the parish church. Marriages and baptisms would have been held there, although no burials were recorded – it was strangely pleasing to think babies had been baptised in the font.

On emerging from the dappled shade of the chapel, we walked the short distance to the strange, lopsided two-storey gatehouse, built nearly 500 years ago as a symbol of wealth, to alert guests they were visiting people of some importance. I failed to notice them, but on the far wall and staircase corridor are some 'burn marks', often found inside timber-framed buildings throughout northern Europe.

Originally thought to be accidental, it's now known that the marks were purposely scorched into walls in the belief they would protect the building from fire.



Gatehouse (photo by Alan Santillo)

There were apparently some wooden 'V's incorporated into the building that I also missed, which are thought to be secret symbols for the Virgin Mary, when illegal masses were rumoured to be held in the gatehouse. I wish I'd looked more closely!



Gatehouse upper storey (photo by Alan Santillo)

The gatehouse underwent major restoration in 1999, with some of the sadly decayed grapevine-carved Tudor bargeboards necessarily being replaced by modern copies. As we climbed the rickety stairs to the upper floor, though, there was a heady (to me) sense of 'oldness' all around, from the very uneven floor to the roof consisting of wooden slats on battens.

The walls of lath and lime plaster and the small windows added to the rarefied atmosphere. I was very glad we'd bothered to climb the stairs, but I couldn't help wondering how this gatehouse had been furnished in the day and what activities had taken place in this most unusual, showpiece...

After exiting the gatehouse and walking towards the manor's entrance, we saw two musicians playing Tudor music. We'd heard them earlier and felt fortunate that they were playing on the day of our visit, as it added considerably to the Tudor vibes. One person was playing a small flute and drum, while the other was playing a stringed instrument with a turn-able handle at the end. They were much appreciated (and Alan did ask permission to take their photos):



The players of Tudor music (photo by Alan Santillo)

The manor house was originally built for John Dumbleton around 1425, in the midst of the 1,700-acre Brockhampton estate referred to as Lower Brockhampton. It lies among the hills of north-east Herefordshire, close to the town of Bromyard and was probably built from timber sourced from the richly wooded estate.

Historical details are sparse, with most information concerning the Barneby family. The earliest certain ancestor was Thomas Barneby, who married Brockhampton heiress Isabella Whitgreave, but he was killed at the Battle of Towton in 1461.

One descendant of his was William Barneby, who was Sheriff of Worcester in 1605. In 1684, Brockhampton was inherited by Richard Barneby, who married Isabella Lechmere, after which successive descendants inherited. One of the rooms was displayed as Isabella's bedroom (photo below), complete with four-poster bed and chamber pot (out of shot).

In 1764, the aspiring Bartholomew Barneby and his wife Betty decided that Lower Brockhampton Manor House was decidedly too small and old-fashioned for their modern standards, resulting in a grander manor house higher up on the estate. Thus, from the 18th century, the old timber-framed manor house was home to estate workers. One such worker, Joseph Cureton, was the estate waggoner in the 19th century, looking after the horses that were needed to carry out much of the heavy work necessary on the farmland and woodland of the Brockhampton estate.



Isabella Barneby's bedroom (photo by Alan Santillo)

Inevitably as time moved on, the ancient timbers and the house in general had deteriorated into a state of disrepair by the time the renowned architect, John C Buckler, visited in the late 19th century. He was much taken with the unique old building and ordered sensitive repairs, with new materials to be used only when essential – if that was the case, they were treated to convey oldness.

Most repairs were carried out in the great hall, where a bedroom floor and three dormer windows were removed. The floor was replaced using flagstones from other places in the house and a staircase was inserted that now leads to the gallery. The kitchen wall was restored and the floor paved with bricks, while brickwork throughout the house was conserved or replaced and roof tiles repaired. Thanks to Buckler, the manor house kept its quaint, medieval character.



The great hall (photo by Alan Santillo)

In 1946, the Brockhampton estate was given to the National Trust by Colonel John Lutley, whose family had owned it for more than twenty generations, although the family's name had changed through marriage several times. For such an ancient, atmospheric house, it's not surprising there are accounts of ghostly encounters, including footsteps, strong presences, drops in temperature and sweet aromas.

We appreciated the way the rooms were well-presented, with each room showing how it was likely to have been furnished over the different centuries, adding extra interest. There was plenty of written information and guides were on hand to answer questions. On emerging outside, we were surprised at how hot it had become – but not too hot for a very pleasant stroll around the orchard walk.

Brockhampton has 21 acres of traditional orchard, with accessible paths that made it a pleasure to wander and admire both the trees and the scenery. A project is underway to reintroduce lost orchards, plant hundreds of trees and restore a healthy, natural environment. We were enjoying ourselves so much that when we'd finished the orchard walk, we continued to wander around the manor house moat, reluctant to leave such a beautiful place.



Showing part of the moat

We returned to the car for our packed lunch, having decided it was a bit hot to eat it sitting outside. Looking at the leaflet we'd been given, there were three estate walks we could choose from for an afternoon meander. We decided on the Hereford Views Walk for one mile, promising "sweeping views across the county".

It's true that we did enjoy one sweeping view, although we were unsure exactly where we were gazing upon. The main feature of the whole walk was actually sheep – loads of sheep. I'm sure they were great sheep, since Brockhampton is home to some historic farming breeds, including Hebrides sheep. I must admit, though, that I inwardly (possibly outwardly) renamed it the Sheep Sh*t Walk. Also, we failed to gasp incredulously at any more sweeping views – perhaps the ancient trees had been prone to a growth spurt.

It had still been a most enjoyable visit, a positive treasure of a National Trust property, tucked away in its own valley and we felt very happy and very much on holiday. Since we wanted and needed a relaxing week away, we returned to our accommodation in mid-afternoon. There was a spot of bother with the television that evening, about which the owner was as puzzled as were, but we could still watch a history channel, so all was not lost. Thus passed our first day.

Weather rating: 10/10; enjoyment rating: 8.5/10.

Monday 20th May

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, which was a bonus. There were many more clouds than yesterday's pure blue, 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. To the left and right was the castle ditch, 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.



The arched entrance

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 set about keeping his new status secure by having castles built along the border of England and Wales. One of these was Ludlow Castle, situated at the heart of his estates and strategically lying at a crossroads over the River Teme, on a significant promontory.

Walter died in 1085 by ignominiously falling off scaffolding at St Guthlac's Priory in Hereford while inspecting building progress and was succeeded by his son Roger. However, Roger was implicated in the 1095 conspiracy against King William II (reign 1087-1100) and was exiled, with lands being passed to his brother Hugh.

Ludlow Castle's stone fortifications are thought to have been started as early as the 1080s and 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 – one of the first masonry castles in England.

Hugh de Lacy died heirless in about 1115, after which King Henry I (reign 1100-35) gave Ludlow Castle and estates to Hugh's niece, Sybil. She married Pain FitzJohn, one of the king's household staff. Pain (an unfortunate name) used Ludlow as the main castle on his estates, but died in 1137 while fighting the Welsh, which resulted in a lengthy and convoluted inheritance and ownership struggle.

Ludlow Castle and estates remained in the de Lacy family, through the following turbulent years until the end of the 13th century, during which time many changes to the castle buildings took place, as the old Norman castle was outgrown.

The great tower was built around 1139 and probably between 1140 and 1177, the outer bailey was constructed to the east and south of the original castle. In the process, the castle entrance changed from the south to the east, so it faced the growing town of Ludlow. The circular chapel in the inner bailey was built and the great hall and solar block were built in the latter half of the 13th century.



The Chapel of St Mary Magdalene

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 solar block

In 1301, the last de Lacy, Joan, married Roger Mortimer, who had the great chamber block built alongside the existing great hall and solar complex. However, he became heavily involved in the baronial revolt against King Edward II (reign 1307-27), which led to his imprisonment in 1322. He escaped the following year and fled to France, where he formed an alliance with King Edward's estranged wife, Queen Isabella. Together they seized power in England in 1327, when Roger was made the Earl of March. Poor Joan was imprisoned by a retaliating king.

Roger had a new chapel built in the outer bailey, dedicated to St Peter, but he fell from power and was hanged in 1330, while Joan was eventually allowed to keep Ludlow. The castle gradually became the Mortimer family's most prestigious property, but in 1381, King Richard II (reign 1377-99) took advantage of the new underage owner, another Roger Mortimer, by putting the Mortimer estates under the control of a committee of senior nobles.

The castle was in royal control until King Henry V (reign 1413-22) granted Edmund Mortimer his estates in 1413, after which it was inherited by Edmund's sister's young son, Richard, Duke of York, who took a keen interest in the castle. 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.

Possibly due to his childhood time at Ludlow, King Edward IV (reign 1461-83) sent his own son Edward, one of the 'Princes in the Tower', to Ludlow in 1473. It was here that young Edward was told his father had died and that he was to assume the title of King Edward V, before he was duped in very suspicious circumstances by his father's brother, who became King Richard III (reign 1483-5).

By this time, the castle had become primarily residential and when King Henry VII (reign 1485-1509) seized the throne, he used it as a regional base and granted it to his son, Prince Arthur. 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. 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 border counties, including the dispensing of justice.

By the 1530s, renovation to the castle was a necessity and in 1552, the porter's lodge and prison were built in the outer bailey. Some lodgings were also built along the south side of the curtain wall, in order to accommodate the judges hearing cases. Although smaller than the other chambers, they had fireplaces and larger windows and so must have been quite comfortable, even having a laundry next to them. A case of keeping up appearances, perhaps?



Judges' lodgings

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603), the castle continued to be extended and modernised, ending up with many features of an Elizabethan stately home. By the 17th century, it was a luxuriously grand household based around the Council of the Marches, but in the face of extreme criticism over its legal practices, it was stripped of its powers in 1641 by an Act of Parliament.

During the English Civil War (1642-46), the castle was Royalist, but when the Parliamentarians took control it was surrendered after a short siege. It was initially garrisoned, but abandoned by 1689 and soon deteriorated. By 1708, only a few rooms were usable and by 1715, the roofs were stripped of lead and the wooden floors had collapsed. Trees, ivy and shrubs grew over the stonework and in the mid-1700s, the castle was stripped further, with some stone reused elsewhere.

The castle was leased to the Earl of Powis in 1771 and his son George maintained the lease, 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 castle ruins were popular, which resulted in Ludlow town becoming fashionable.

In 1811, the castle was bought for £1,560 by the latest Lord Powis and is now owned by the trustees of the Powis Castle Estate. Much work was carried out, including continued maintenance and archaeological excavations, while the inside open spaces were used for local events. During World War II, the Great Tower was used as a lookout post by the Allied military and the grounds were used by the United States' forces for baseball games. It was a well-used and well-loved castle!



The Great Tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

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. We walked around the curtain wall after, reluctant to leave, but very castle-satisfied.

Since we had an hour left on the parking ticket, we wandered around the Ludlow streets for a while, marvelling at the remaining old buildings. There was a market taking place, which added to the atmosphere and there also happened to be a rather wonderful ice cream shop, from where we purchased a most delicious ice cream and sat on a nearby bench to eat it, within view of the castle.

It had been a fabulous day and when we returned to the accommodation in mid-afternoon, we found that the owner, despite not knowing what he'd actually done, had managed to sort out the television for us. A definite bonus 😊.

Weather rating: 8/10; enjoyment rating: 9/10.

Tuesday 21st May

Today was another National Trust day, with good weather before the rain was due to hit us the following day. Croft Castle, a 17th-century crenellated manor house with parkland was about 25 minutes away and we arrived at 10 just as the Carpenter's Tearoom was opening. It was a pleasant tearoom, with an undercover outdoor terrace, where we sat with our cappuccino and cake feeling very relaxed.



Croft Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

The attractive Grade 1 listed manor house wasn't due to open until 11, so we decided we'd go for an investigative walk to view it from the outside, with the charming, also Grade 1 listed, St Michael and All Angels Church adjacent to it.

The Croft estate had been founded by a Norman knight, Bernard de Croft, and was recorded in the Domesday book of 1085. In the 1390s, Sir John de Croft had married Jonet, the daughter of Owain Glyndŵr, and it's believed that after Owain's victory in 1402 over Sir Edward Mortimer at the Battle of Glyn Blas in Powys, he sent forces to nearby Croft Ambrey, a defensive Iron Age hill fort.

I'd had no idea Croft Castle had this fascinating early history and as we walked away from the house, on a grassy path amid wildflowers, with trees all around, we were serenaded by almost constant birdsong. We walked along in the bright, clear air down the path to a lake in such a truly delightful setting that I even took a video. There were hardly any other people around and I was aware of feeling supremely peaceful. The view back to the manor house was even better:



Looking back at Croft Castle and St Michael & All Angels' Church
(photo by Alan Santillo)

Back to the history and during the Wars of the Roses (1455-87), Sir Richard Croft fought with the future Yorkist king Edward at the 1461 Battle of Mortimer's Cross, after which he became a trusted confidant of King Edward IV (reign 1461-83).

His wife Eleanor was governess to Edward IV's two sons, who were later known as the unfortunate Princes in the Tower, while Sir Richard himself became treasurer to King Henry VII (reign 1485-1509) and was steward to Henry's son Arthur, when he and Catherine of Aragon stayed at Ludlow Castle from 1501-2.

Sir Richard's grandson, Sir James Croft, served the young King Edward VI (reign 1547-53) as Lord Deputy of Ireland and in 1570 became Comptroller of the Royal Household for Queen Elizabeth I (reign 1558-1603). It was probably him who had the old castle demolished in order to create a more agreeable Elizabethan house that was surrounded by formal garden terraces. Understandable, but a shame.

In the early 17th century, Sir James's grandson, Sir Herbert Croft, was responsible for building the shell of the present castle, but later converted to Catholicism and retired to a Benedictine monastery in France – each to his own. However, three of his sons inherited the estate. The eldest, Sir William Croft, fought with the Royalists during the English Civil War and after a ferocious battle against the Parliamentarians at Stokesay Castle in 1645, was killed as he retreated to Croft. I was beginning to love the local connections, namely Ludlow Castle we'd already visited and Stokesay Castle we would be visiting later in the week.

After this, James Croft, the second son, also took part in the civil war, but died without an heir. The youngest son, the Reverend Herbert Croft then inherited. For his loyalty to King Charles II (reign 1660-85), he was appointed Bishop of Hereford in 1660 and Dean of the Royal Chapel in 1668. He also financed restoration on Croft Castle from the damage it had suffered during the civil war.

However, his grandson lost most of the family's wealth in the collapse of the South Sea Bubble enterprise in 1720 and had to sell up in 1746. In the 1760s, the current owners remodelled the castle in the Rococo-Gothic style popular at the time.

In 1923, the Croft family repurchased Croft and during the 1920s-1930s, the castle had a new lease of life. When it was inherited by Sir Henry Page Croft in 1941, though, he decided not to live in the castle and it was used by St Mary's Convent School for Girls until 1946. Then in 1947, when Michael, 2nd Lord Croft, inherited, he and his sister Diana set about saving Croft for the nation, eventually ensuring it would be preserved permanently, thanks to the National Trust. The castle opened to the public in 1960, still occupied by family members.



St Michael and All Angels' Church

By the time we'd looked in the church and at the garden, the house was just opening. The guide at the door spoke enthusiastically to the small group of visitors (including us) looking curiously around. He explained that the hall we'd entered looked old, but dated to about 1746. It was thought the space it occupied was once open for carriages to drive into the courtyard, as the original entrance was on the west front, where chestnut trees were planted 350+ years ago.

After that, we were left to our own devices, although guides were on hand in various rooms to answer questions if so desired. I merely desired to admire the different features in each room and marvel at how the other half lived.



The saloon (photo by Alan Santillo)

I was struck by how homely and comfortable some of the rooms were, particularly the saloon (above), which was used for relaxing and entertaining. It looked bright and feminine, whereas the Oak Room with its thick, impressive oak walls looked comfortable and masculine. In fact, the rooms were quite different, particularly the Blue Room with its unusual 3D-effect panelling and its lovely ceiling:



The blue room (photo by Alan Santillo)

The library interested me, as libraries always do, even though most of the books are usually off-puttingly dull. This particular library, however, had a very early copy of Samuel Johnson's dictionary, covered in Sir Herbert Croft's notes. This was because he wanted to publish his own improved version, but unfortunately this venture failed due to lack of financial support...

The Dining Room would have been the scene of many family moments, with Chippendale-style chairs and a 19th-century Cumberland dining table:



The dining room (photo by Alan Santillo)

The Ambassador's Room was interesting for a unique reason, as in 1914 it had been specially prepared for a visit from the Austrian ambassador, with the mind-boggling name of Albert Viktor Julius Joseph Michael Graf von Mensdorff-Pouilly-Diestrichstein. What were his parents thinking? However, when Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated on 28th June 1914 with his wife Sophie, World War I was triggered. This meant the British hosts and the ambassador were on opposing sides and the visit never happened.

I must confess I was surprised at the extent of Croft Castle's history and it struck me how a simple description like '17th-century manor house' can be decidedly misleading. It's a satisfying way to be misled, though! Since it wasn't quite midday, we led ourselves into the walled garden for a pleasant stroll around the planting and then into a glasshouse, where a few plants were for sale.

When we emerged, a sudden shower decided to rain upon us, so we sheltered for a while under a convenient spreading apple tree until it passed. It was time for lunch, so we headed back to the Carpenter's Tearoom and sat in the undercover outdoor terrace once again to consume a tuna mayo baked potato each, with a cold citrus drink from a company from Devon, county of both our births 😊.

It had been a highly enjoyable visit and we still had several afternoon hours to fill, so we drove to Berrington Hall, a neo-classical 18th-century mansion, about 15 minutes away, near Leominster. My first impression of the red sandstone mansion was that it looked huge, austere and not very welcoming – but the National Trust guide was welcoming and once inside, there was plenty of colour and subtlety.



Berrington Hall (photo by Alan Santillo)

Berrington had been owned by the Cornwall family since 1386, but was sold in 1775 to Thomas Harley, a businessman and banker, who had been a Member of Parliament for London from 1761-74 and Lord Mayor of London in 1767. He wanted a country retreat and lived the rest of his life in his native Herefordshire.

He commissioned Henry Holland, an architect favoured by English nobility, to redesign Berrington Hall in 1778-81 and the grand design was to include what turned out to be the final work of the renowned landscape gardener, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (whose son-in-law happened to be Henry Holland).

In the mansion, the boudoir portrayed a fascinating insight into the life of Thomas Harley's wife, Anne, and the life she led. The room itself was colourful and lavish, its barrel-vaulted ceiling with a painting of Venus and its shell-shaped alcove with beautiful blue columns exuding a sense of refinement. The boudoir was the private space of Anne and her daughters, where they would sew, write and gossip, as well as entertain other female friends. If only walls could talk...



Into the boudoir (photo by Alan Santillo)

A further insight into Anne's privileged life was to be found in 'A Dress Fit for a King' exhibition, in the form of a beautifully intricate, but most bizarre dress she had worn to a court event. There were strict dress code rules for appearing before royalty and it was not permitted to wear any such dress more than once.

This particular dress had been sold in 1901 and ended up in Christie's Auction House with a few parts missing, but the National Trust had fortunately been able to buy it. The guide on duty seemed proud of this acquisition and it was certainly a talking point. I have to say, though, that the style brought home the madness of fashion! There were other examples of clothing from the era on display, which someone interested in needlework and fashion would find extremely interesting.



The mad dress

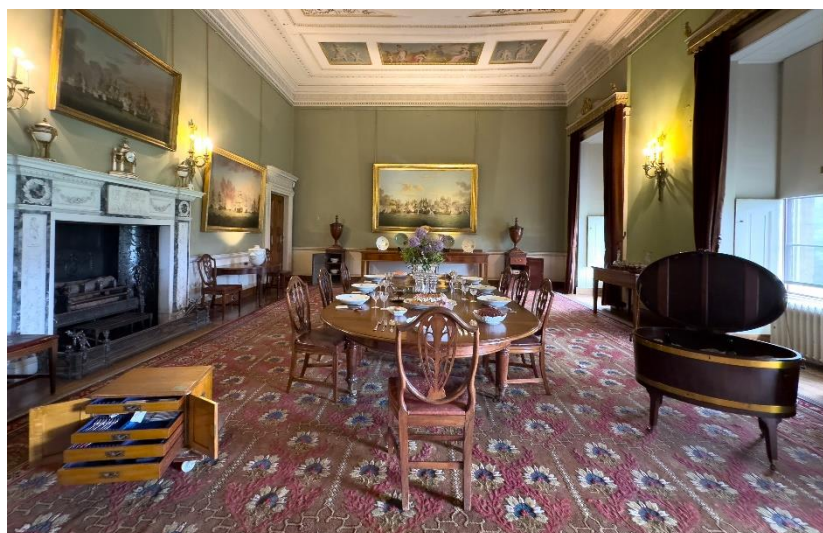
After Harley's death, Berrington was owned by his daughter Anne and her husband George Rodney, after which it remained in the Rodney family for 95 years. In 1864, Lord George Rodney (7th Baron Rodney) inherited the estate and married the Honourable Corisande Evelyn Vere Guest, who refused to move to Berrington until a bathroom tower had been built in the courtyard. It was constructed in rendered brick and contained bathrooms and lavatories. Fair enough.

Not fair enough, though, were a couple of house fires that cost around £50,000 in today's money for renovations. The agricultural depression of the 1870s didn't help and neither did the personal debts of the 7th Baron, which led him to sell Gainsborough portraits and valuable books. Eventually, he was forced to sell the house and estate in 1901. The following year, Corisande filed for divorce on the grounds of cruelty and adultery, clearly finding herself in an unhappy situation.

Berrington was purchased by Manchester businessman Frederick Cawley, MP, later Lord Cawley. It was no good, I couldn't get the Crawley surname out of my mind, thanks to the wonderful *Downton Abbey*. Concentrating on Cawley, though, Lord Frederick benefitted from the 1901 death of Queen Victoria and the extensive mourning set in motion, by owning the patent for a pure black dye, making a great success of his Lancashire cotton finishing business.

In around 1908, he began a redecoration of the mansion, but did little to disturb Holland's original design. For instance, he had Victorian fireplaces replaced with Georgian ones and added Wedgwood plaques in the drawing room. Tapestries were cleverly installed in the Marble and Staircase Halls to replace gaps left by pictures sold by the Rodneys. Speaking of staircases, I had been most impressed by the scale and aesthetic beauty of the grand sweeping Staircase Hall.

Despite seeming on the masculine side with four impressive sea battle paintings, the spacious dining room looked very tasteful, with a large fireplace and the feeling that it would have been enjoyable to sit at the table and partake of some fine fare.



Dining room (photo by Alan Santillo)

The drawing room was tasteful too, with not too much clutter. It had been used by Red Cross nurses in World War II, when Berrington had been commissioned as a convalescent hospital, run by Lady Cawley from her office in the boudoir.

Unfortunately, the Cawley family had suffered greatly in World War I, by losing three of their four sons and if that wasn't bad enough, they also lost one son in World War II. When the 2nd Lord Cawley died in 1954, the estate was handed to the Treasury as part-payment for death duties, later being passed to the care of the National Trust. Lady Cawley was allowed to remain living at the house until her death in 1978, at the ripe old age of 100. Good for her!

Our tour of the house had come to a natural end, so we wandered outside and surveyed the expansive landscape, namely the parkland that Capability Brown had designed, with its inspiring views west to Wales and the Black Mountains. As with many of Capability Brown's designs, the parkland was dotted with meticulously arranged trees and shrubs, to create an impression of pastoral elegance. An enormous 14-acre lake, complete with an island, had been created entirely by hand and is now a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Although we gazed at the breathtaking site, we felt a little too tired to go walking very far, so contented ourselves with a wander around the walled garden. The welcoming guide had mentioned the 'Curve', a rare Capability Brown architectural feature, which we looked for while admiring flower borders and vegetable beds, as well as a peaceful orchard containing rare specimens of old fruit trees. I particularly liked the sound of the 'Pig's Nose Pippin' variety of apple!



Lupins bordering the orchard

We discovered the 'Curve' brick wall, but while it was clearly receiving a lot of care and renovation, it was too difficult to take a remotely reasonable photo. I'm sure in future, it will be looking very fine again. Another unusual feature was a special lawned area known as the Drying Ground, for airing washing out of sight of the house family members – a case of keeping up refined appearances.

It was time to take our refined (or not) selves back to Preston Wynne, for some late afternoon and evening relaxation, which is exactly what we did. The forecast was adamant we were going to be beset by rain the following day, so I set about researching Hereford Cathedral. I was so relaxed, though, that I sat and watched television instead, with a glass of wine and some nibbles. Holidays are great!

Weather rating: 7.5/10; enjoyment rating: 9/10.

Wednesday 22nd May

The forecast was right, so Hereford Cathedral was our visit of the day. Although not far, the first task was to find a car park and the second task was to find the cathedral from the car park. We managed to achieve this, but the misty rain prevented a photo of the outside, so we went in search of the cathedral café, which was frankly not obvious. However, having located the café through a non-likely looking doorway, we were soon sitting down with cappuccino and cake.

The cathedral site has been a place of worship since the 7th century, although no part of any building earlier than the 11th century survives today, which is a great pity. It's thought that Hereford was the centre of a diocese as early as the 670s, when the Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus, divided the Mercian diocese of Lichfield, founding Worcester for the Hwicce and Hereford for the Magonsæte. How I love the old Anglo-Saxon names!

The current cathedral is dedicated to St Mary the Virgin and St Ethelbert the King. In 794 AD, Ethelbert (or Æthelberht in Old English), the young king of the East Angles, came to ask King Offa of Mercia for permission to marry his daughter. His subsequent murder was committed for unspecified reasons, although medieval sources claim he was captured while visiting his future bride, following orders from either King Offa or his queen, Cynethryth, before being murdered and buried.

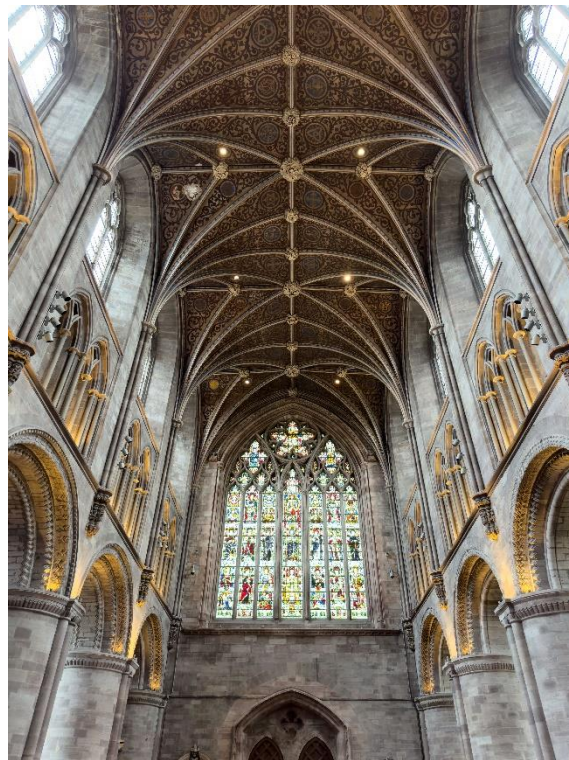
According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, he was beheaded, after which his body is said to have been brought to the site of the modern cathedral by a pious monk, who would therefore have had to dig his body up for transportation. Whatever actually happened, Ethelbert was buried at the site of the cathedral, which apparently gave rise to miracles occurring at his tomb. In about 830, a Mercian nobleman named Mildrid was moved so much by the miracles that he had the small church there built in stone and dedicated it to the by then sainted king.



St Ethelbert's memorial

This stone cathedral stood for around 190 years, replaced between 1020-40 by Athelstan, 25th Bishop of Hereford. However, in 1055 it was plundered and burned by a rebel army under the Welsh prince Gruffydd ap Llewelyn, when Ethelbert's shrine and other treasures were lost. The attack was fiercely resisted, which resulted in seven canons losing their lives and the cathedral being destroyed. The only surviving artefact is an 8th-century illuminated Gospel Book.

Hereford Cathedral remained ruinous until after the Norman Conquest of 1066, when in 1079, Robert of Lorraine was consecrated the diocesan bishop and set about its reconstruction. His work was continued by successive bishops and completed by 1148. Surviving Norman Romanesque features include the nave arcade, the choir aisle, the south transept and the crossing arches.



The Norman nave (photo by Alan Santillo)

I must confess to feeling a little bewildered at first as to what part of the cathedral I was in and on arrival would very much have appreciated an explanatory leaflet with a plan and short descriptions of noteworthy features. I do have very little sense of direction and perhaps we came in by the 'wrong' entrance, although I did find one leaflet that helped a little. In the end, we bought a proper guide book from the shop, but by that time I'd become frustrated with what I considered a lack of clear signage, especially concerning the tombs. However, I am aware that the building is foremost a place of worship and not a tourist attraction!

Between 1226 and 1246, the Lady Chapel was rebuilt in the Early English style, with a crypt below. This chapel housed the shrine of St Thomas of Hereford between 1349 and its destruction in the mid-16th century. Appointed Bishop of Hereford in 1275, Thomas de Cantilupe (as opposed to Canteloupe) gives rise to historical controversy, being an 'enemy of Jews' and demanding they be expelled from England if unconverted. Despite being excommunicated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, he was canonized, with a cult following and recorded 'miracles'.



The Lady Chapel (photo by Alan Santillo)

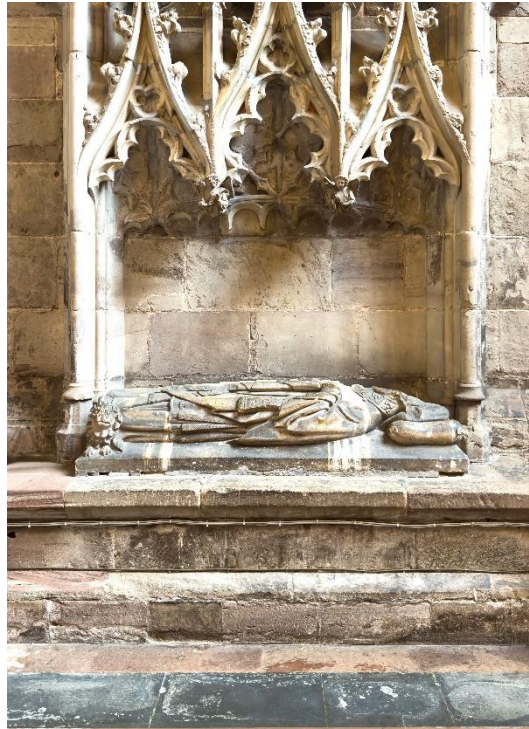
From 1611, the Lady Chapel was the location of the Chained Library, which we would be viewing later. As to the somewhat notorious St Thomas de Cantilupe, his original stone tomb had been in the north transept and had escaped Reformation destruction, now being one of the few pre-Reformation shrine bases to survive anywhere. Today, a restored shrine is to be found in the north transept, its base being the original tomb. I'm sure St Thomas of Hereford did many 'good works', but considering his antisemitic stance, I can't condone his veneration.



Shrine of St Thomas de Cantilupe (photo by Alan Santillo)

Improvements to the building continued throughout the following centuries, with the last additions to the cathedral being made in the early 16th century. This meant that the current cathedral was built over an astonishing total of 440 years.

Both King Henry VIII's 16th-century Reformation and the 17th-century English Civil War resulted in upheaval and destruction. I'd noticed examples of this early on, without realising, as I'd wondered why the faces of some tomb effigies had been flattened. Finally it dawned, as being a protest against the Roman Catholic church.



Flattened and featureless (photo by Alan Santillo)

During the civil war, the city of Hereford eventually fell into the hands of the Parliamentarians after a long siege, when soldiers ran riot and caused much damage that could never be repaired. A brave dean of the cathedral, Herbert Croft, preached against the desecration by Parliamentary soldiers, who threatened to shoot him, but were prevented from doing so by their commander.

1786 saw another cathedral disaster, when the west tower fell on Easter Monday, resulting in the ruin of the west front and damage in the nave. This necessitated major repair work, for which the English architect James Wyatt was called in, but rather than just repairing, he made alterations that were not well received.

The fabric of the building deteriorated further during the first decades of the 19th century and in 1841, much restoration work took place, including the choir stalls, the reredos behind the high altar, a replica Norman arch and ornate tiled floors. Finally, in June 1863, the cathedral was reopened with solemn services.

The west front was restored between 1902-08, with further changes continuing during the 20th century. There really was a lot to take in and as with many other historical places, a further visit would consolidate and extend the interest of this visit. For the meantime, though, we more or less went where our feet led us – and one of these places was back to 'the crossing' in the north transept.

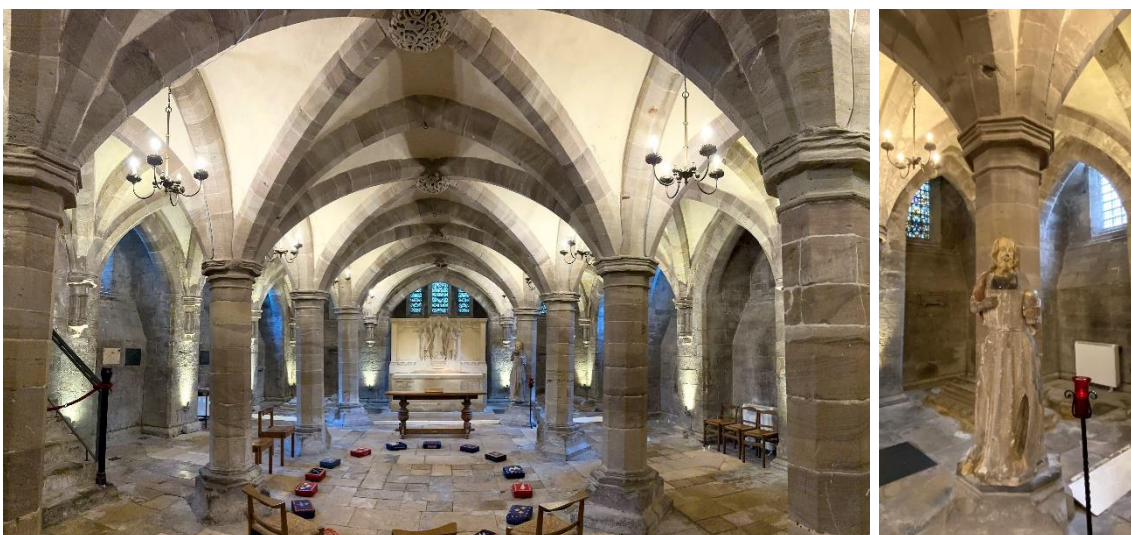
This bright area pays tribute to the expertise of the Norman builders, with four huge arches opening up the space and supporting the significant weight of the cathedral tower with its bells above. What was initially most eye-catching, though, was a modern 1992 addition made by Simon Beer, suspended over the nave altar. Called a Corona, it's a symbol of continuity at the heart of the crossing, with its structure echoing the chevrons on the Norman arches. It's also said to be a reminder of Christ's crown of thorns and is a very worthy addition to the cathedral.



The Crossing with its Corona (photo by Alan Santillo)

Our feet also took us to steps leading down into the crypt. I'm not entirely sure if we were disobeying, as there was a notice saying closed to the public, but nothing barred the way and on peering down it was empty, so we descended below for a sneaky peek. It was great! It seemed some sort of service was due to take place, as a few wooden chairs were placed around a circle of kneelers on the floor.

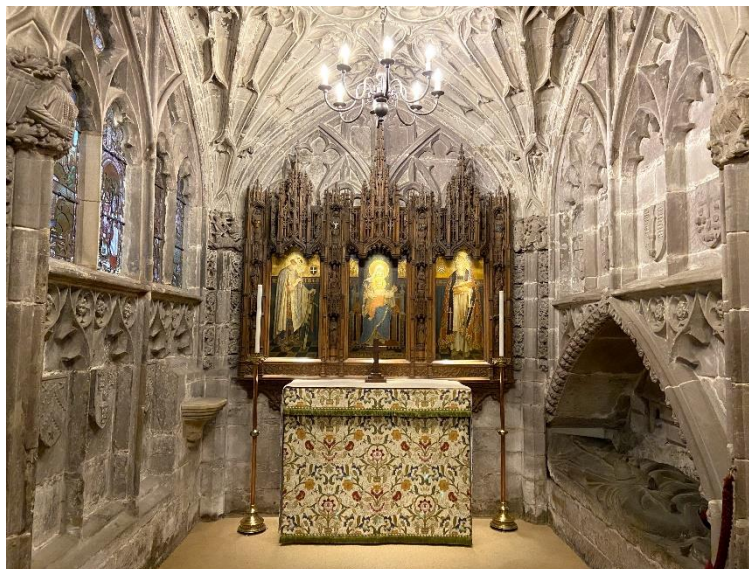
The remarkable atmosphere was as expected for the only Early English crypt in an English cathedral, dating from 1220. The vaulted ceiling with intricate bosses, pillars and an altar with reredos added to a sense of ancient awe. We looked briefly around at some tombs, including two medieval ones with effigies that had literally been de-faced. Before we quickly ascended the steps, I noticed the statue of an old guy with decorated vestments, who I later discovered was St John the Baptist.



The 13th-century crypt (photo by Alan Santillo) and **statue of John the Baptist**

Back above, we discovered the Stanbury Chapel, built in around 1475 and a splendid example of early Perpendicular architecture. It felt like entering an old, sacred space, with fan vaulting low enough to see the details and intricacies of heraldic carvings. It must have been spectacular when all originally painted.

John Stanbury, Bishop of Hereford for 1453-74, was a Carmelite friar who became confessor to King Henry VI and is said to have helped the king to draw up plans for the foundation of Eton College (which shouldn't be held against him). He was buried on the north side of the high altar and his chantry chapel was built nearby, where masses would have been said for his soul. I loved the old stonework, enhanced by stained glass windows and a reredos that had been added in 1923.



The Stanbury Chapel

We were beginning to tire and it was approaching lunchtime, but we had to stop and take a photo of the tomb of Sir Richard Pembridge and his mysterious third leg. Sir Richard, who died in 1375, was a Herefordshire knight, who had been made a Knight of the Garter by King Edward III. There was a clear link between a garter and a leg and thankfully, a notice above his third leg explained the mystery.

When his alabaster tomb had been made, the Garter insignia was correctly only on his left leg. The right leg was damaged in the 17th century, probably a casualty of the civil war, and was carelessly replaced by a wooden leg that wrongly included a garter. This disturbing state of affairs had been rectified in the 19th century, when a new alabaster leg, correctly without a garter, was commissioned. The anomalous wooden leg (with garter) was the spare leg on display!



Sir Richard Pembridge's tomb and his third leg (photos by Alan Santillo)

All this intrigue about legs and garters had induced an appetite, so we headed to the café, which was already packed with people. Thanks to patience and good positioning, we managed to sit at a table to eat our freshly made sandwiches. A few steps away was the entrance to the Chained Library and the Mappa Mundi, so as soon as we'd finished, we went across and paid the £7.50 each to enter the world of medieval books and maps – that is, the largest complete world map drawn on vellum known to have survived from the Middle Ages.

The first exhibits were some delicious book chests and for someone who loves both books and chests, I was transported with delight. To see an early 14th-century book chest complete with a carrying pole was a rare pleasure. Crafted from poplar wood (although with a new top, circa 1930), it was bound with iron and probably held the library of a travelling medieval bishop. It must have been very heavy...



Early 14th-century book chest

Another amazing chest was a mid-14th century one, with later alterations, mostly of oak. Its front was elaborately carved, with three separate numbered locks:



Mid-14th century book chest

I hadn't known what to expect from the famous Mappa Mundi, so was curious to discover its history and meaning. Dating from around 1300, its countries, rivers and seas looked quite different from today's world maps. This was nothing to do with medieval map makers believing the world was flat, as they apparently had likened the way humans walk on the sphere of the Earth to the way a fly walks around an apple. Rather, it reflected a combination of geographical, biblical and classical learning of those times. With Jerusalem at the centre and Christ depicted reigning above, it demonstrated the importance of Christianity in medieval times.



The Mappa Mundi

There were other treasures to be seen, including the main panel of a medieval frame, which once had two attached doors and was used to house the Mappa Mundi. More evidence suggests it could well have been the board on which the map was drawn. There was also a copy of the 1217 revision of Magna Carta and the unique King's Writ, which was a letter that accompanied the original 1215 Magna Carta when it was first delivered to Hereford. There was, in fact, almost too much to take in, but I was eager to set eyes on the chained library.

Again, I didn't really know what to expect, but had read that the chaining of books was the most effective and secure way of keeping valuable books safe from the Middle Ages up to the 18th century, with widespread use in European libraries. Hereford Cathedral's own particular chained library dates from the 17th century and is the largest to have remarkably survived with all its chains, rods and locks.

The chain is attached at one end to each book's front cover, while the other end is slotted on to a rod that runs along the bottom of each shelf. This system means that a book can be taken from the shelf and read at the desk, but it cannot be removed from the bookcase. Slightly frustrating, perhaps, but ingenious.

At first glance I didn't realise what was looking slightly odd (apart from the chains), but then realised that the books were facing the 'wrong' way compared to today's traditions, with their spines to the back. This was for a practical purpose, in that it allowed the book to be lifted down and opened without it needing to be turned around, thus avoiding any danger of tangling the chain. Again, most ingenious.



The Chained Library

There were quite a few people milling around the library shelves, which sometimes made it a little difficult to read all the information on offer. I do remember gazing in awe at some truly ancient texts, but failed to take in properly what I had seen. To my shame, I missed the cathedral's earliest and most significant book, namely the 8th-century Hereford Gospels, one of 229 medieval manuscripts occupying two bays of the chained library. I wish I had paid more attention...

Queen Elizabeth II opened Hereford Cathedral's new library building in 1996 and the specially designed chamber of the chained library section means that all the books can be seen in their original arrangement, in the controlled environmental conditions that they need. I would highly recommend any bibliophile to visit.

However, our visit had come to an end and so we left the ecclesiastical world of vaulted ceilings, arches, altars, chapels, tombs and books, to discover it was still raining outside. It had been a great way to make the most of a rainy day and we returned to Preston Wynne feeling very satisfied with our choice of destination.

Weather rating: 5/10; enjoyment rating: 8/10.

Thursday 23rd May

Although the sky was overcast and it was quite windy, it wasn't raining and so we continued with our plan to visit Stokesay Castle in Shropshire, an English Heritage fortified manor house near the Welsh border that promised a lot of unusual historical interest. There was a tearoom and an audio guide to top it all 😊

As ever, I was fascinated by the early history and name derivation of Stokesay. At the time of the Domesday Book in 1086, it was part of a prosperous estate called 'Stoches', an Anglo-Saxon word suggesting a cattle farm was there. It was held by the Lacys, who originated from Lassy in Normandy and went on to become lords of Ludlow and Weobley, and one of the great families in the Welsh Marches.

Stoches was later divided into two manors, North and South Stoke, then during the reign of King Henry I (1100-35), South Stoke was assigned to Theodoric de Say, also of Norman origin. His descendants were tenants of the Lacys for over a century and added their surname (whereas North Stoke became Stoke upon Tern).

The Says were influential people in the Welsh Marches and like the Lacys, had interests in Ireland. When Walter de Lacy died in 1241, his only heirs were two granddaughters, which led Hugh de Say to make a deal with the husband of one of them, John de Verdon, trading Stokesay for Irish estates – just like that!

John de Verdon was a key figure among the supporters of King Henry III (reign 1216-72) against Simon de Montfort, leader of the opposition to the king in the barons' war. In May 1264, however, he was taken prisoner with the king and his son, Prince Edward, at Lewes. Once the conflict was over, he decided to go on crusade, leaving Stokesay in the hands of a tenant, who in 1281 sold his rights in the manor to the wool merchant, Laurence of Ludlow.

Laurence set about having a first-rate home built there soon afterwards. It had very probably neared completion when Laurence obtained a licence to crenellate his acquisition. This could have been due to its position near the Welsh border, because although King Edward I's conquest of Wales in 1284 had led to an uneasy peace when the house was being built, there were still pockets of unrest and active bands of thieves necessitated a demonstration of power.

Stokesay Castle's particular blend of a comfortable manor house and a fortified dwelling was presumably carried out to reassure the Welsh Marcher lords, many of whom were keen to borrow Laurence's money. In the 13th century, wool was England's principal export, bringing in much wealth. Wool from the Herefordshire and Shropshire borderlands was of a particularly high quality and Laurence was so successful that as well as investing in land and property, he was even able to lend money to the king and important lords of the Welsh borderlands. He was, in fact, one of the earliest known examples of a rich townsman to set himself up as a renowned country esquire. No wonder he aspired to crenellations.

Having walked from the tearoom towards the manor, our first view of Stokesay Castle certainly looked like a manor and a castle. Adjacent to it was a the parish church of St John the Baptist, which was built around 1150 as a chapel for the Stokesay settlement. However, it was badly damaged in the civil war, after which it was largely rebuilt. For now, though, our interest was Stokesay Castle itself.



Our first view of Stokesay Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

Laurence would have moved into his new castellated manor house in around 1291, his business success as one of the most powerful English wool merchants rewarded by acting as advisor to King Edward I. The king was desperate for money to finance a war with France and had been planning a wholesale seizure of wool, but Laurence suggested he raise money by tripling the export duty on wool instead.

The wool producers were furious, as the burden of the tax fell on them, rather than the merchants. Perhaps it was karma, or perhaps it wasn't, but Laurence met a watery end in 1294, when a fleet sailing for Flanders under his command ran into a storm and Laurence's ship was wrecked off the Suffolk coast. The wool producers obviously believed in karma, one writing: "Because he sinned against the wool-growers, he was swallowed by the waves in a ship full of wool."

Laurence's descendants benefitted from his legacy, remaining lords of Stokesay for over two centuries, no doubt enjoying the prestige of mingling with the upper classes as respected country squires. Laurence's son, William, probably had to attend to the final details of work to the castle, while his grandson, Sir Laurence Ludlow, was arrested by order of King Edward III (grandson of King Edward I) for failing in his duty as tax collector in the wool industry. This is ironic, seeing his grandfather was instrumental in raising extra taxes on wool with King Edward I.

Our first view of Stokesay Castle had been the back, so it was astonishing to see the front entrance, namely the 17th-century timber-framed gatehouse. It was a definite stand-out feature, with its mustard yellow paint and attractive carved woodwork. A closer inspection revealed some ornate wooden carvings and in the passageway some carpenter marks. It had been built in 1640-1, when William, Earl Craven had been the owner and had fortuitously survived the civil war.



Entrance through the gatehouse (photo by Alan Santillo)



Carpenter marks

Our tour began in the hall, which had been the social and political centre of life at Stokesay Castle and must have seen so much varying activity over the decades. It was a huge space, with soaring curved beams that were awe-inspiring in themselves. Features such as the roof structure and the open hearth were very much akin to castle halls of the past and it could well have been the ambitious Laurence of Ludlow's aim to suggest to high-ranking visitors that the crenellated manor house and the family's social status as lords were older and therefore more aristocratic than they actually were. He was certainly keen to make an impression.

The roof and the staircase have been dated dendrochronologically (a magnificent word) to the late 13th century, thus confirming their authentic heritage. Largely unchanged features such as these almost never survive to the present time, so Stokesay Castle is a rarity indeed. Having said that, the light streaming in through the windows of the hall made photo taking very difficult, but we did our best. Also, the audio guide was most excellent, informative and easy to use.



The Great Hall with wooden staircase (photo by Alan Santillo)

Just off the hall we next went into the basement of the north tower. This area had probably been used for different functions over time. It appears that when Laurence of Ludlow bought Stokesay in 1281, the north tower was already in existence, with the basement being used to prepare food eaten in the hall and/or to wash dishes. A well in the basement may have been used for these tasks.



The pale red floral mural

A century later, it's thought the area was used as a separate dining space, in view of the decorative mural still visible as a pale red floral pattern (above). It's also possible that this room had once been connected to the now demolished kitchen block, through a passage in the wall that has unfortunately been lost.

The two upper floors of the north tower were reached from the hall via a wooden staircase, where there was a brilliant view of the hall roof. The staircase and roof have survived from the late 13th century, both with the same carpenters' marks (that I sadly failed to notice). Level one had originally been a single space, but the fact that a small fireplace was later inserted into a tiled portion of the room suggests that it was divided soon after it was completed. It's quite likely that this comfortable area was the steward of Stokesay's chamber, due to his prestigious position as the castle's leading official, managing the household.

The 13th-century earthenware glazed tiles looked special, their patterns depicting vegetation, heraldry and mythical beasts – a somewhat strange mix!



North tower's level one chamber with fireplace and tiles

On the other side of the hall was the two-storey solar block, which Laurence probably used for his own living quarters before the south tower was constructed. A door in the south-east wall of the hall allowed access to the ground floor, which had originally been one large single room with a cellar down a flight of stairs. Its functions over time probably included being a storeroom and at some point a dining room. Other features suggest Laurence probably had a strong room there.

The audio guide led us outside and up a flight of steps to the solar, where a door at the top led into what had originally been private apartments for Laurence and his family. This room more than any other was adapted to more modern standards in the 17th century, which is about the time the gatehouse was replaced. Standing in the solar is therefore a good place to resume the history of Stokesay Castle.

None of Laurence's descendants engaged in trade, but became members of the upper class, marrying into wealthy families and filling responsible positions such as members of parliament, sheriffs and JPs. They weren't without controversy, however, as Laurence's grandson, Sir Laurence Ludlow, is said to have been killed in a skirmish in 1353, a decade after his brother William had met a similar fate.

A lack of heirs when Sir Richard Ludlow died in 1498 led to Stokesay becoming the property of Thomas Vernon from a prestigious Derbyshire family, who was the husband of Sir Richard's granddaughter, Anne. Thomas's grandson, Henry Vernon, was probably responsible for repairs to the north tower in around 1577, but seems to have been another controversial figure. He was arrested for debt in 1591 and five years later sold his Shropshire properties, including Stokesay, to Sir George Mainwaring of Ightfield. Sir George, chose not keep it for long and in 1620 it became the property of Dame Elizabeth Craven and her son, William.

There is verifying evidence from records and dendrochronology that William, an enthusiastic soldier, had the fabulous gatehouse built in 1640-1.



The gatehouse from inside the grounds

However, the English Civil War broke out in 1642 and although Stokesay was predominantly Royalist, it saw no conflict until 1645. In June, 800 men were sent to blockade Ludlow and set about capturing the garrisoned Stokesay Castle. Since they had no cannon, they would have stormed the castle and been entitled to kill the occupants, so the sensible and chosen option was to surrender. Shortly after this one time the castle saw military action, some Royalists from Herefordshire were involved in a fierce clash, trying (but failing) to recapture Stokesay.

Two years later, it was reported that the site's barns and stables had all been pulled down, but a 1648 survey shows that the castle fabric seemed not to have suffered from the recent troubles. This was unlike the unfortunate parish church that was severely damaged when some Royalist horsemen, with their horses, took refuge there in 1646, but were driven out by Parliamentarian soldiers.

As for William Craven, although he had not been involved in the fighting, he was known to be strongly Royalist and all his estates were eventually confiscated. Stokesay Castle might have escaped being pulled down, but it was nevertheless made indefensible by having its walls demolished, like a mild form of slighting.

The Stokesay estate was still prosperous, with its castle now simply a farmhouse (but in my opinion, a crenellated fascinating farmhouse). In October 1647, Charles Baldwyn, probably already a tenant, negotiated a lease that allowed him to restore the building and duly transfer the lease to his son, Samuel.

Charles Baldwyn and his family are thought to have refurbished the solar to the impressive standard as it survives today. The Baldwyns, successful landowners and successive MPs for Ludlow, lived at Stokesay from around 1647 to the late 18th century. Samuel was a rich lawyer, whose daughter Eizabeth was born at Stokesay in 1650, which seemed to add a personal touch to the history.

I very much liked the solar, with its amazing mid-17th-century wood panelling, an imposing fireplace with an extraordinary overmantel above, large windows and an air of combined comfort and grandeur. I think English Heritage must have liked the solar too, as it had provided a colourful depiction of what it probably looked like in its heyday, which is something that I always find helpful.



The solar (photo by Alan Santillo)



English Heritage depiction (photo by Alan Santillo)

William Craven recovered his estates after King Charles II's restoration in 1660, but although he and his heirs remained landlords, a succession of leases meant the Baldwyn family kept their tenancy until nearly the end of the 18th century. They stopped living there, however, sub-letting to a series of tenant farmers.

These tenants occupied parts of the castle for much of the 18th century, with some buildings being used as workshops and stores. The hall was used as a granary, which was practical, but still seems like sacrilege. The south tower basement was turned into a smithy, where a fire in 1830 burnt out all the floors above it.

Beside the solar block was the aforementioned south tower, an impressive addition if ever there was one and to my mind the grandest and most handsome looking part of the castle. It's thought likely that Laurence of Ludlow had it built as he became richer and more powerful, its dual purpose being a demonstration of his growing status and also to provide protection. Although it had no drawbridge, it was no doubt a secure residence, and despite its original timbers being destroyed by the 1830 fire, the floors are thought to be where they originally were.



The handsome south tower exterior



Inside the south tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

The first floor of the south tower consisted of a single room well-lit by windows nearly all the way around, which must have provided good views. As the windows had no grooves with which to hold glass, though, shutters would have been closed in bad weather and warmth given by the fire. A latrine was accessible down a passage to the right of the fireplace, so the room had its pros and cons.

The second floor also had a latrine, but although it had originally been a single space, it had at some time before the fire in 1830 been divided into three by wooden partitions. One of the windows may have allowed access to a wooden balcony, or perhaps been a point from where heavy items of furniture could have been hauled up, since the stairs were decidedly very narrow.

More narrow stairs led to the roof, which had at one time contained a small shed-like structure with a pointed wooden roof, useful perhaps for lookout soldiers during the civil war. The roof was an excellent vantage point, its battlements still possessing fixtures and fittings useful for defence, as well as wall slits.



Wall slits in the battlements

At this point, our tour was over and it had been a most fascinating one. Thank heavens for English Heritage and indeed all the people who have been responsible for keeping buildings like this alive and reasonably well. In fact, when Stokesay had fallen into what seemed like irreversible decay, it was saved by an antiquarian and artist called Frances Stackhouse Acton, who acted on (sorry) her deep interest in Stokesay and appealed to its owner Lord Craven in 1853 to save it from utter collapse by clearing it out and making some necessary repairs.

It was something, but not enough. In 1869, the Stokesay estate was purchased by John Derby Allcroft, who began a programme of careful restoration in 1875. It was most likely still continuing in 1877 when the writer Henry James visited, by which time a caretaker was living in the gatehouse and visitors had free access.

Allcroft's descendants continued caring for Stokesay Castle to the best of their ability, but the cost of maintenance proved too great and in 1986 the property was placed in the guardianship of English Heritage, who became its owners in 1992. A four-year restoration followed, as sensitive and unobtrusive as the first one, so that the site we visited today is sound and astonishingly authentic.

Not only had the castle visit been thoroughly enjoyed, but so also was the brie and cranberry toastie lunch we had in the tearoom where we'd had coffee and cake earlier. Reluctant to leave, we then went to look at the church that had been built in around 1150 as a chapel to the castle when the Say family were there.

It was a pity it had been heavily damaged in the civil war, but it was still very interesting, having been largely rebuilt after the war and thus a rare example of a church being built during the Commonwealth period. Particularly interesting features were some wall paintings of biblical texts, the two-decker pulpit, the gallery and the box pews, as well as some original Norman features at lower levels.



Church of St John the Baptist (photo by Alan Santillo)

It never ceases to amaze me what historical gems are to be found when you least expect them and Stokesay Castle was one of them. We returned to Preston Wynne very happy with our day and still enough of the afternoon left in which to relax 😊

Weather rating: 7/10; enjoyment rating: 10/10.

Friday 24th May

Our last day had dawned and brought with it a heavy cloud cover and the threat of rain. However, we had located two sites that offered some unusual historical appeal and set off first of all to the wonderfully named Snodhill Castle. It was very much a ruin, but I didn't care, I totally loved the name.

The journey there took us along some very narrow roads that were frankly not for the faint-hearted, but a lifetime of Devon and Cornwall country roads had inured us to the squeeze factor and between Alan's driving and the Satnav, we arrived safely at somewhere that seemed to lie between farmland and woodland. We'd taken our own coffee, so fortified ourselves for the unknown.

It turned out to be much more straightforward than I'd imagined, as not far from where we parked was the entrance to the castle (or I should say castle ruins) through a gate. Attached to the gate were some double-A4 paper guides on offer for £1 in the honesty box, so we were honest and paid for one. It was excellent and compiled by the Snodhill Castle Preservation Trust, which had been set up in 2016 with the support of Historic England, plus other donors and benefactors.

Not only that, but Professor Alice Roberts and the *Digging for Britain* team had been there on 5th July 2023 to check out progress on the 2023 excavation work on the chapel and postern gate. The television programme was apparently aired on 11th January 2024 and we missed it! How did this happen? Good weather last year had helped the archaeologists to reveal five courses of fine stonework at the postern gate that had previously been unknown, as well as the layout of the chapel. A silver longcross coin, possibly of King Henry III, was also discovered – but I'm jumping ahead of myself, so back to the entrance gate.

Labelled 'Britain's newest, oldest castle', it had nearly been left to rot and until 2017 was impassable and on the verge of collapse, until its rescue commenced. 'Snod Hill' rises almost 230 feet/70 metres above the Golden Valley, about 1 mile/1.6 kilometres south of Dorstone in West Herefordshire. The ruined motte and bailey castle is recognised as one of the major castles of the Welsh Marches, built in the 11th century between Norman England and the Welsh Princes.

A notice had greeted us as we entered through the gate, advising us of either a very steep climb straight up to the castle, or a more gentle path around the site to the top. We chose the easier option, which actually gave us a better idea of the land surrounding it and its outer edges. It may have been the easier route, but as we'd been warned, the paths were uneven and bumpy, with tree roots, stumps and badger holes. It must have been hell before some paths were cleared!



Easy approach to Snodhill Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

The original castle was built in 1068, by order of William FitzOsbern, 1st Earl of Hereford, who became one of the great nobles of Norman England and was a companion and counsellor of William the Conqueror. Snodhill Castle was one of nearly 400 castles built to secure the Welsh border, there being seven castles in the Golden Valley alone. It's thought that rather than initially being built in timber, this castle was built straight away in stone, as FitzOsbern was known to have had other early stone castles built, such as Chepstow, Monmouth and Wigmore.

Snodhill Castle was then granted to Hugh L'Asne, a close supporter of FitzOsbern, after which it passed by marriage to Robert de Chandos, thereafter being held and developed by the Chandos family until the 15th century. In 1401, King Henry IV ordered John Chandos to refortify the castle against Owain Glyndŵr's Welsh revolt.

Chandos took action by building a huge tower in the castle bailey, known as the north keep. When its circumference had been uncovered in 2019, its dimensions (49 feet/15 metres by 43 feet/13 metres, with walls 10-13 feet/3-4 metres thick) revealed an extremely strong and large structure. This may well have contributed to Snodhill Castle surviving Glyndŵr's attacks on Herefordshire.

Chandos died in 1428 with no heir, his property being inherited by the Beauchamp family, relatives of his widow. There's no doubt that Snodhill Castle was in a prime location for various uprisings and it seems that two successive constables of the castle were killed during the Wars of the Roses (1455-87). At this time, Richard Neville (known as 'the kingmaker') briefly held it, then it passed to Richard of York (later King Richard III) and thereafter to the Crown. When it came into the possession of Queen Elizabeth I, she gifted it to her champion, Robert Dudley.

In 1568, Robert sold it to the Vaughan family, by which time it had a 12-acre deer park, a 'pleasance', an independently defensible north keep (uncovered in 2021) and a Royal Free Chapel (uncovered in 2022 and 2023), the chaplain of which was Robert Fayrfax, a favourite composer of Kings Henry VII and VIII.



The chapel

As the sole royal chapel built within a lordship castle, the Royal Free Chapel of Snodhill is an oddity, since all other royal chapels are built within royal castles. It must have been a castle of some standing, as from at least the 13th century to the 16th century, it had chaplains that were personally appointed by the monarch. It was still in use by 1597, but was demolished and the site lost for over 400 years.

Back to the Vaughans, who were committed Royalists and prepared Snodhill Castle for a siege during the English Civil War. It's unclear what actually happened, although cannon balls have been discovered nearby and recent findings suggest it was still occupied at that time. Ultimately, it's considered very likely that the castle was slighted by Parliamentarians in 1647 to prevent future military use.

In 1657, the impoverished Vaughans sold Snodhill Castle and its lands to William Prosser, who is thought to have set up a thriving coachbuilding business in London. He enlarged the estate at Snodhill, but dismantled the castle and its chapel to use some of its masonry in his newly enlarged Snodhill Court and farm. Unfortunately, the following centuries are not well documented, but it remained in private ownership until 2016, when it was acquired by the Snodhill Castle Preservation Trust, backed by Historic England, to preserve the remaining structure.

As we walked around and up, it felt as if the castle was still in the early stages of revealing its secrets and in fact, the Snodhill Castle Preservation Trust information leaflet said: "it's a castle of unfolding puzzles." Much effort had been made to make the various castle areas accessible, although care still needed to be taken.

We first looked around the remains of the north keep, where it was easy to see it must once have been a strong, imposing structure. It would have been situated near the castle hall and therefore higher than the present remnant, making it both a secure refuge and a formidable deterrent to attackers. Its archaeological rescue had been a delicate process, but the hard work involved now allowed access to its interior from the bailey and also, some early 15th-century pottery had been found.



The north keep (photo by Alan Santillo)

We followed the path and the route on the information leaflet, walking along to the south curtain wall, where above us was rubble from when a section of the wall had collapsed. At that time, the wall's age was unknown, but it's been discovered that it was part of the very early 11th-century stone defence. Repairs had been carried out, but we still had to take care on our way up to the inner bailey.

This would have been the central area of the castle and the leaflet tantalisingly informed us that about 3.3 feet/1 metre beneath our feet there would be a great hall, solar, kitchens, bakehouse, granaries, brewery and stables. As it was, we were afforded a good view of the terraces making up the earthworks. One day...

Next we made our way to have a closer look at the chapel, where a small bronze figurine of a saint or knight had been found in 2022. In the far apse wall, there were two recesses – one an ambry (a safe for vestments and sacred vessels) and the other a piscina (a basin in which to wash communion vessels).



The two recesses

Finally, we climbed the now convenient steps to the high keep, the surviving parts of which are thought to date from around 1160. In 2019, excavations had revealed the remains of a spiral staircase and below it, the foundations of an 11th-century rectangular hall keep. Interestingly, the portcullis slot was quite visible, its base denoting where the original lower floor level would have been.



The high keep (photo by Alan Santillo)

As we made our way down the incline and back to the car, I was very happy we'd made the effort to come and see this exciting, relatively recent discovery. There are several indications – such as window glass, painted wall plaster and medieval artefacts – that this castle possessed high status accommodation suitable for an earl or even a king, which suggests there is more history to unfold.

Our next stop was an even more ancient site, namely Arthur's Stone. This Neolithic burial chamber is found in the hills above Herefordshire's Golden Valley, which lies in the lee of the Black Mountains in Wales. Snodhill Castle is also located in the picturesque Golden Valley, where sometime after 1412, Owain Glyndŵr is said to have spent the last years of his life hiding under a false identity with his daughter Alys and her husband, after his rebellion against King Henry IV failed.

There are numerous 'Stones of Arthur' in the UK (around 200 in western Britain), all of them claiming a link to the legendary King Arthur. As to this particular Arthur's Stone, there are several far-fetched tales: one suggesting this tomb was built to mark the site of one of Arthur's battles; another that the stones were already there when Arthur slew a giant, who fell on the stones and left indentations still on the quoit stone; and yet another that these impressions were left by Arthur's elbows or knees as he knelt there to pray. He must have spent inordinate amounts of time praying, or else he had exceptionally hard knees or elbows...



First view of Arthur's Stone (photo by Alan Santillo)

Elbows and knees aside, the sky was overcast and threatening rain as we prepared to investigate. The chamber consisted of nine upright stones, with an enormous capstone estimated to weigh in excess of 25 tonnes, with a long, curved entrance passageway measuring 15 feet/4.6 metres. An isolated stone probably formed part of a false entrance that may have provided a visual focus for ceremonies. I love the idea of rituals taking place at these sites. This one being built in an area of summer pastures, gatherings would likely have occurred on a seasonal basis.



The enormous capstone (photo by Alan Santillo)

There is conflicting information about the site, with the stones thought originally to have been buried within an earth mound aligned north-south, around 82 feet/25 metres long, with an east-facing entrance and the false portal south-facing. Sadly, the mound is mostly eroded and the capstone broken, with a big section fallen from its underside. Still impressive enough, though, to be C S Lewis' inspiration for the stone table on which Aslan was sacrificed in his *Chronicles of Narnia*.

There was once a cup-marked stone called the quoit stone to the north, but this can no longer be distinguished clearly and a stone to the south with small human-made cup marks is now referred to as the quoit stone. To the north, a small road known as Arthur's Stone Road dissects what would once have been the site of the elongated mound, while nowadays the site is defined within a wooden fence.



Closer view of Arthur's Stone (photo by Alan Santillo)

The surrounding area is very rich in prehistoric archaeology, with Arthur's Stone previously considered to be the northern outlier in the Severn-Cotswold Group of chambered tombs. However, an excavation in 2021 confirmed that the monument once extended to the south and the 5,700-year-old hilltop tomb began as a long mound made of stacked turf. There was evidence of different groups of potholes, with indications that the orientation of the site changed at some point.

I find it wonderful how knowledge of history is able to keep changing and growing and also how much history is all around us. There are about 200 known long barrows in this area, with presumably a number of others that were unfortunately destroyed before records were kept. Happily, the quest for more understanding is continuing, as English Heritage in partnership with the University of Manchester are making a further exploration of Arthur's Stone in July this year.

It had begun to rain when we returned to the car for our packed lunch, before a third destination of the day at the Weir Garden, a National Trust site promising a walk amid nature. The rain had fortuitously disappeared by the time we arrived, but so had our National Trust cards, which led to a frantic five minutes of fruitless searching! We thought we'd have to forgo the Weir Garden without a weir (removed in 1696 when an Act of Parliament was passed to make the river freely navigable), but the kind lady at the kiosk let us in without our membership cards.

There weren't too many people around as we walked along the path of the riverside garden. It had been designed in the 18th century, lined with ancient trees and offering expansive views of the River Wye and Herefordshire countryside. Described as typical of a Georgian English landscape garden, the focus was on picturesque surroundings, punctuated by features such as a boathouse, fishing path, rock garden and viewing bridge. The sky remained overcast, but on our welcome amble amongst the greenery, we came across a lovely laburnum:



A lovely laburnum

Ruins of a Roman temple lie within the garden, associated with a high-status Roman villa, although the most obvious remains were believed to be that of a nymphaeum, which was a Roman sanctuary consecrated to water nymphs:



Remains of a Roman nymphaeum (no nymphs)

Having returned to the car park, we crossed some farmland and into the walled garden. Crossing the farmland, however, involved waiting for a huge number of sheep on the move, who inevitably left behind their business – loads of it – yes, as on the first day of the holiday, it had turned into another Sheep Sh*t Walk.

The late 18th-century walled garden was very pleasant, although technically only a three-quarter walled garden, possessing only three walls instead of the usual four. This is apparently to prevent cold air becoming trapped inside four walls, thus creating a frost pocket, as well as helping to receive more sunshine as the sun moves across, with no fourth wall blocking out late afternoon rays. It makes sense ... I think. The garden today is used to grow flowers, fruit and vegetables.



Wall and garden in the walled garden

As we walked back to the car with sheep sh*t soles, I realised the end was nigh, our week's escape was drawing to its inevitable close. I'd enjoyed our last day, even the adrenaline-inducing narrow roads (although to be fair, I hadn't been actually driving along them). Yes, as far as 'last days' go, it had been a good one.

Weather rating: 6.5/10; enjoyment rating: 8/10.

Our Preston Wynne accommodation had been comfortable and spacious, which definitely helped the relaxing factor. Despite enjoying leisurely afternoons, we'd had a satisfyingly filled stay that clocked up visits to four National Trust sites, four independent sites and one English Heritage site. I'm glad we went to each one of them and appreciated the area as a whole very much. Also, in many months of atmospheric oddities (mostly rain), the weather hadn't been too bad, either 😊.