KENT 2019 – CASTLES AND GARDENS
(with visits to East Sussex)

Saturday 6th July - Day 1

We had lived in Dover for a total of nine months in 1975, when Alan had been a Radio Officer on *Free Enterprise 8*, one of the Townsend-Thoreson cross-channel ferries and for some considerable time we had felt a return to Kent beckoning.

Added to this were memories of holidays with Alan's parents in 1982 and 1983, when his father was working at Chatham Dockyard. I think we belonged to the National Trust at that point, as I doubt my dear father-in-law would have paid for all the places he'd taken us to visit in such a short space of time. It was good of him to drive us, but it had felt as if he'd been attempting to tick off as many sites as possible in what was often a frustrating experience of quantity over quality.

All things considered, the time to re-visit Kent had arrived. We'd managed to find self-catering accommodation in a rural village two miles from Yalding, which seemed to be fairly central to most of the National Trust and English Heritage sites that interested us most. There would be a fair bit of driving on some days, but Alan declared that he was ready and more or less willing.

He may have changed his mind after the journey from Cornwall to Kent, with the notorious M25 to contend with, but we arrived safely and the accommodation, named Little Melrose, suited us very well. The bedroom and bathroom looked out onto an orchard, which was fitting since Kent is referred to as the Garden of England, with its abundance of orchards and hop gardens. We had already passed several of the distinctive hop-drying buildings known as oast houses. Yes, we'd finally done it, we were re-visiting Kent.

Sunday 7th July - Day 2

Sleep was a little on the surface, but not too bad for the first night in a strange place. Actually, the strangest thing about this place was the noise the flush made every single time it was pushed. Maybe it was something to do with the septic tank system the owners had informed us about, but the resulting sound resembled the loud, prolonged mooing of a cow with sinus problems.

Thankfully, the sinus problems Alan himself had recently been plagued with were in abeyance and we looked forward to our first holiday visit. Due to tiredness from the previous day's driving, along with the sky being fully clouded over, we chose the nearby National Trust site of Scotney Castle, a mere nine miles away. It had been one of the places we'd been whisked around in 1982 and all I vaguely remembered was a romantic looking castle with a moat.

The air was pleasantly warm despite the clouds and we were soon drinking a cappuccino at the café outside, as the holiday feeling permeated through – or perhaps it was the caffeine? After presenting ourselves at the entrance, we were given a timed ticket to go inside the house at 11:00-11:15, discovering that the more modern house had been built in 1837 from sandstone quarried from the grounds of the old 12th-century castle (the one remembered from the first, fleeting visit). I kept wishing and hoping that the cloud cover would lift to allow what would be some picturesque photos, but the cloud cover wasn't playing.

Scotney Castle amongst the trees (photo by Alan Santillo)

We wandered around the grounds to acquaint ourselves with the layout, instantly recognising the old, picturesque castle of previous years. Our allotted time-slot came to enter the house and although I confess that I wasn't anticipating much of interest because I love gardens best, the house proved well worth a visit.

The original Scotney Castle and its estate had been purchased by Edward Hussey in 1778, but by the early 19th century, his grandson, also named Edward, had the current mansion house built. It was designed by Anthony Salvin, with the old castle being partially destroyed to make an attractive garden feature. Seriously? Deliberately destroying a 12th-century castle for a *garden feature*!

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

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

With our tour of the house over, we made our way down to the moated castle ruin, with each turn of the path giving a slightly different picturesque view. The sky was still boringly white and overcast, so our photos weren't going to be the best they could, but it was still incredibly pretty. There was a delightful garden that was small, but filled with a colourful array of plants. Flowers against a backdrop of castle ruins look so good. It was just a pity about the sky:

Colourful garden (showing minimal sky)

The whole of the moated castle ruins area looked pleasantly situated and well laid out, so it seemed a pity that the buildings had been abandoned – although this was for an understandable reason, as we later found out. There were still some intact rooms in the castle, though, so we naturally went inside to investigate.

The old castle remains (photo by Alan Santillo)

In one room there was a hidden priest-hole inside a cupboard. From 1591, during the reign of Protestant Queen Elizabeth I, Scotney Castle had been the secret hiding place of Father Richard Blount, courtesy of the sympathetic Catholic Darrell family, who had owned the property at that time. This situation lasted until 1598, when local Justices of the Peace raided the castle searching for him.

Blount managed to escape, thanks to his trusty manservant (a phrase not often used these days), who was named Bray. This enterprising and probably desperate man created a diversion by raising a false alarm that thieves were stealing horses from the stable. This allowed Blount the opportunity to climb over the wall and plunge into the icy moat below. He made it to land, where loyal Bray was waiting for him and whereupon the fortunate pair made their dramatic escape.

In another room there was an account of the Hussey family's history. They had made their money from the iron industry in Worcestershire and had moved to Sussex in the early 1700s. Edward Hussey had sadly taken his own life at the castle in 1816, whereupon the property passed to his son, who was also called Edward. This Edward unfortunately died a year later in London following a long illness, after which time his wife chose not to use Scotney as the family's main residence. By 1828 however, her son, another Edward, became involved in the estate again and decided to build the new house.

All things considered, I had a lot more sympathy and understanding of why the old castle had been abandoned in favour of a new house – but it seemed a step too far to plunder and destroy part of it and in so doing, render it no more than a fashionable folly? What folly! However, there were still some decent reminders of the past to bring the remaining rooms to life, so all was not lost. The wooden staircase had been built in around 1378, so it was perfectly possible to imagine previous generations who had touched its carved posts.

In fact, the earliest records of the site go back as far as 1137, when the estate was owned by Lambert de Scoteni, from whom the name Scotney clearly derives. Records indicate that a high-status house was in existence at that time, which then passed to the Ashburnham family in 1358. About 20 years later, the risk of French invasion during the Hundred Years War led to fortification of the site and the consequent building of Scotney Castle. However, there remains conjecture about the effectiveness of its low-level defences and some historians are of the opinion that the castle was probably more of a status symbol.

Be that as it may, the whole place was full of romantic beauty and appeal. Judging by the number of other visitors wandering peacefully around both the top and bottom areas, many other people thought so too. We meandered up to the café at midday for some lunch, after which we found ourselves meandering back down again for further investigation and a walk around the moat. It's no surprise the gardens are a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest, with a quarry garden that contains a 100-million-year-old impression of a dinosaur's footprint.

The weather forecast had promised the clouds would lift, but the weather forecast had unfortunately got it wrong. Although we walked around hopefully in the drizzle for a while longer, we eventually decided we'd enjoyed enough of our second visit to Scotney Castle to be satisfied. A restful Sunday afternoon and a quiet Sunday evening ensued at Little Melrose – apart from the weird noise of the flush, that is. I suppose there are far worse noises…

Monday 8th July - Day 3

I slept quite well on the whole, awaking to the sound of a screechy bird somewhere outside. If it had been inside, *I* would have been outside. The sky was looking quite a lot better than yesterday, so I happily agreed to Alan's suggestion of a visit to Hever Castle, the famous childhood home of Anne Boleyn.

It was one of the places Alan's father had rushed us around in 1983 and my single memory of it is standing and looking with awe at an artefact of some sort that had once belonged to Anne Boleyn herself. In recent years, my interest in history has escalated immensely, so I was practically hyperventilating at the mere thought of Hever Castle. Maybe I exaggerate, but I was really looking forward to it.

It was a 40-minute drive to Edenbridge, a town and civil parish in the Sevenoaks district of Kent on the border of Kent and Surrey. It takes its name from the River Eden, a tributary of the River Medway, but its name apparently derives from the Old English name of Eadhelmsbridge, so was Eadhelm the Old English for Eden?

However, I digress. As the castle grounds didn't open until 10:30 and the castle even later at 12:00, there was no need to hurry. I had, after all, had plenty enough of that in 1983! The route to Edenbridge took us along some rather bendy, rural roads, past Tonbridge, a busy market town on the River Medway.

Alan's sinuses were misbehaving slightly, but he seemed happy to arrive at our destination, where many cars were already in the car park. I think he was pleased we'd be redeeming the pre-paid entrance voucher he'd received courtesy of Tesco Clubcard, as otherwise we'd have been paying out £15.60 each.

I noticed a swathe of wildflower planting, which always pleases me, as we started our walk down to where the castle was situated amongst expanses of green parkland, trees and a path beside topiary borders and flowers. First of all though, we fortified ourselves with a cappuccino, sitting outside at the popular café. We didn't linger, however, as it was becoming clear that the opportunity of taking a photo of the castle before its midday opening was lessening by the minute.

Amazing Hever Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

A nearby moat complete with lily pads was most attractive, not only to us, but to several ducks and also some large goldfish. After the people-free photos had been achieved, we wandered around some individual garden areas, such as a Tudor knot garden, beds planted with flowers for strewing floors and a physic garden for medical purposes. The sky was still cloudy, but it was bright.

These simple gardens were purposefully planted as they would probably have been in the time of King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. In an adjoining Chess Garden, there were chess pieces cleverly cut from golden yew, with an astrolabe dating from the Stuart Queen Anne's reign (1702-1714). Whether Tudor or Stuart, I didn't mind in the slightest, as the gardens were so pretty.

The Chess Garden

We noticed people were starting to go inside the castle, so we quickly joined the queue and were the last two in the first group of people allowed entry. Alan managed to purchase the hire of two multimedia guides from a staff member who seemed reluctant to part with any, as groups of schoolchildren were expected. Either Alan was charmingly persuasive, or we looked suitably disappointed, as the somewhat harassed man handed over our guides for £3.75 each.

There was so much to look at! The original castle had been built around 1270 and owned by William de Hever, a sheriff during the reign of King Edward I. The gatehouse and walled bailey were surrounded by a moat and entered by a wooden drawbridge. William's heirs had continued to fortify the castle, which had several owners until being purchased by Anne Boleyn's great-grandfather, Sir Geoffrey Bullen (Boleyn). Several different versions of the surname appear in records, due to the fact that there was no standardised spelling in England in medieval times.

Geoffrey Bullen/Boleyn became Lord Mayor of London in 1459 and his increased wealth and status led him to convert and update the castle, so that a comfortable Tudor house was added inside the castle walls. By 1505, Sir Thomas Boleyn (Anne's father) had further expanded and improved the family dwelling, which must have been a wonderful place for a privileged childhood like Anne's and her two siblings. It seems a pity they ever became involved so intimately with King Henry VIII and the Tudor court, with such tragic consequences.

After Anne and her brother George were executed and their father was shunned until his death two years later, the castle came under the ownership of Henry VIII. He gave it to his fourth wife, Anne of Cleves and although he divorced her soon after, she continued to live at the castle as the 'king's sister' until her death in 1557. This was news to me and made the visit even more rewarding.

The castle was then sold to Sir Edward Waldegrave and remained in that family for 160 years, when it was sold in the early 1700s to Sir William Humphreys, who was Lord Mayor of London. In 1749 it belonged to Sir Timothy Waldo, although by the end of the 19th century, it had declined quite drastically.

Fortunately, a wealthy American named William Waldorf Astor came to the rescue in 1903. He purchased the site and set about renovation and expansion into a Tudor-style village. I'm not sure about the latter, but it all looked good.

His improvements were very tasteful, with accommodation added and extensive landscaping of the grounds. A two-year excavation in the meadows and marshland resulted in a stunning 35-acre lake, which we later viewed. Leading from the lake back to the house, he created a delightful Italian garden. Individual garden 'rooms' containing columns, statues and sculptures from when he had been the American ambassador in Italy were graced by small grottoes, fountains and cascades.

He became a British subject and was created the first Viscount of Hever in 1917. I have a tenuous family link! He was the grandfather of Waldorf Astor II, who married Nancy, who became the first female MP to take her seat in the Plymouth Sutton ward, as a Conservative member. I'll gloss over that. My father met Nancy in Plymouth at a charity event when he was selling strawberries on behalf of the Scout Association and offered one to her. She accepted and said it was very good. I know no more, but my father was proud of both the encounter and the photo:

Nancy Astor approves of my father's strawberries

The castle and estate had been sold by its last owners to Broadland Properties Limited in 1983. Speaking of the castle, we were ready to begin our house tour, complete with the multimedia guides (so named because of their various functions), which were thankfully easy to use. We loitered for quite a long time in the inner hall, which had been the great kitchen in Tudor times. There was a lot of Italian walnut panelling and some striking portraits, but the Elizabethan-style ceiling especially caught my eye, featuring the Tudor rose.

In fact, William Waldorf Astor had been most sympathetic to the Tudor era and the rooms were a pleasing mix of Boleyn and Astor. Rooms had naturally been changed – for instance, the Astor drawing room had contained domestic offices in Tudor times, while the dining hall had been the great hall, originally open to the roof rafters. In this room was a Tudor artefact in the shape of a lock once belonging to Henry VIII, who was paranoid about assassination attempts and would take his own locksmith to fit locks to his bedchamber whilst visiting other homes.

The morning room had been a private retiring room with a fireplace dating to the 17th century, while the library had been an administration/estate office. The room that intrigued me most of all, though, was where a stone spiral staircase opened into the small, sparsely furnished bedroom of Anne Boleyn's childhood.

Underneath an original 15th-century half-domed ceiling was a portrait of Anne wearing her famous 'B' necklace, a wooden chair and a cradle, but by far of most interest to me was a wooden chest carved with "Anne Bullen – Hever" with other carved letters and numbers. I was actually gazing upon Anne Boleyn's chest!

My favourite room containing the…

… chest of Anne Boleyn!

I was so transported with historical excitement that I failed to take in properly the contents of the next room, the Book of Hours Room. This contained two of Anne's illuminated prayer books, the earliest one from around 1450, handwritten on vellum (specially-prepared animal skin/membrane) and containing her signature.

A book of hours was the name for a personal prayer book, which had been popular in England during the Middle Ages. They were so-named because of eight short services to the Virgin Mary that were read at fixed hours throughout the day. The room not only contained Anne's book of hours, but also an exceptionally rare panel that had once belonged to Anne of Cleves. I may or may not have seen it…

In the Queens' Chamber, mannequins depicting King Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn and Mary Boleyn gave presence to some amazing Tudor portraits of Henry VIII's wives, considered to be one of the best collections after the National Portrait Gallery. I find it so special to peer at the colourful likeness of a famous person who lived centuries earlier. In fact, the whole collection of portraits at Hever Castle was breath-taking and far more in context there than in a city art gallery.

The big guy and his second Boleyn amour

Thomas Boleyn (Anne's father) had added the staircase gallery over the entrance hall in around 1506, thus allowing access between the two wings of the house and his freshly built long gallery upstairs. It was here I surveyed a most rare portrait of Mary Queen of Scots wearing white mourning, painted after the death of three close family members. The colour of deepest mourning among medieval European queens had been white – it was an incredible painting.

Moving reluctantly on into King Henry VIII's bedroom, which isn't something that's said every day, more delights awaited. The panelling in this room dates to the 16th century, but the ceiling is the oldest in the entire castle, dating from around 1462. It's generally believed that Henry stayed at Hever Castle several times during his courtship with Anne Boleyn and the thought that the notorious king had lain in bed and looked at that very ceiling was … bizarre, to say the least.

When the Catholic Waldegrave family had owned Hever Castle from 1557 until 1715, they had added an oratory to one of the rooms (now named the Waldegrave Room), hidden behind panelling. An oratory was a small chapel, particularly for private use, so when we came across it, I felt vaguely as if I were snooping. It was worth that slight discomfort, though, to peer through the gap in the wood and gaze upon a beautiful, historical devotional space.

The beautiful oratory (photo by Alan Santillo)

The Long Gallery created in 1506 by Thomas Boleyn lived up to its description, extending across the entire width of the castle. It has been restored faithfully with obvious great care, worthy of the notable paintings of key royalty from the York, Lancaster and Tudor families that it displays. The portrait of Elizabeth Woodville, grandmother of Henry VIII, is on public display for the first time and the portrait of Prince Arthur, Henry's older brother who died in 1502, is the only one painted in his lifetime. I felt as if I had died and gone to some sort of heavenly art gallery.

However, I confess I was beginning to tire of too much good history as we then moved on to the section of the castle dedicated to the Astor family – sorry Nancy, who admired my father's strawberries. Sorry also to William Waldorf, who did a truly amazing job of re-establishing Hever Castle as a place of beauty and interest. I tried to be interested and there were some noteworthy artefacts, memorabilia and pieces of furniture, but I was temporarily historied out.

The tour of the castle concluded in the oldest part, which was the gatehouse where the 13th-century castle owners would have entertained, slept and eaten (and used the garderobe that emptied directly into the moat). Nowadays the esteemed gatehouse contains armour and historic swords, plus implements of discipline, torture and execution. I always find it very disturbing to imagine these gruesome degradations of humanity in use on human flesh and generally pass by swiftly.

It thus felt a relief to emerge from the subdued lighting inside to the brightness of the castle courtyard, where the front portcullis is thought to be one of the oldest examples in the country and where the drawbridge reinstated by William Waldorf Astor can still be raised. I was bemused to see we had been inside for 1½ hours, so for a relatively small dwelling, it certainly contains a great deal of interest. I'm a little surprised I didn't remember more from our initial visit in 1983.

The time had come for our picnic lunch, as we settled on a wooden bench beside a tree that was close to a stretch of water. Ducks waddled by from time to time amid a background chatter of visitors. It had been a wonderful morning, to be followed by a wonderful afternoon walking around the Italian garden.

Tall clipped yew hedges and long sweeping lawns occupied the central space, bordered by two 12-foot high walls constructed from local stone. We walked down one side described as the Pompeiian Wall, stopping to admire the small individual gardens along its length that contained beautiful planting and an astonishing array of Roman artefacts. It kept crossing my mind, though, that while William Waldorf Astor may have been the American ambassador in Italy, was it morally right of him to take away bits of its history? However, it was beautiful regardless.

Just one small section of a magnificent garden

At the end of the walk, an impressive loggia looked out on to a 38-acre lake – no wonder it had taken two years to excavate, it was massive. Pillared colonnades gave the loggia an air of grandeur and balustrade steps descended to a small piazza below that was decorated with a classical sculpture.

It felt as if we'd wandered into another world altogether, but something deliciously practical kept our feet literally on the ground. Those feet had unwittingly led us to a Kentish ice-cream kiosk, where we proceeded to indulge in a wonderful (though somewhat large for a single scoop) honey and honeycomb cornet. Heavenly.

After this, it was time to walk back to the castle, this time along the Pergola Walk on the other side of the lawns. The area this side was planted with ferns and moisture-loving plants in shaded grottoes, until we came across a rose garden planted with thousands of roses. I didn't actually count them, but their fragrance and variety of colours was astounding. Even here a few Roman artefacts graced the scene, creating a well-balanced English-Italian effect.

There was more to the garden, but our energy had dwindled and we reluctantly called it a day. We had omitted the English yew maze, the Sunday Walk (well, it was Monday), the Church Gill Walk and Anne Boleyn's Walk. Since there are 125 acres of grounds at Hever Castle, we were never going to cover it all. I was sad we hadn't visited nearby St Peter's Church, which dates back to the 12th century and contains the tomb of Sir Thomas Bullen/Boleyn. However, as we drove back to Little Melrose, I was *very* contented with our Hever experience. I had been in history heaven all day, although hopefully it hadn't shown!

Tuesday 9th July - Day 4

We awoke to a cloudy sky again this morning, but all was well in self-catering accommodation land – I was even becoming accustomed to the sound of the distressed bull flush. To be honest though, I was really missing a leg-rest on the sofa and some teabag squeezers, but we can't always have what we want.

Besides, Alan had announced that he felt ready and able to tackle a longer drive to Dover Castle. I found it slightly hard to believe we'd lived in Dover in 1975 and (according to my erratic memory) had only ever sat on some grass a little way down from the castle, without ever venturing inside. Perhaps we were broke, or distracted. On reflection, it had probably been both.

However, today that reprehensible oversight was going to be rectified. We set off at 09:15 and arrived at 10:40, after having a truly unpleasant drive through Maidstone, a stretch on the M2 and then the A2. It therefore felt undeniably good to approach the castle from the top road and easily find a space in the large, sprawling car park. I'd had no idea the castle is so huge, standing proudly as it does above the harbour and ferry port where Alan had once set sail, mostly to Zeebrugge in Belgium and on occasion to Calais in France.

I felt an agreeable mental tick on the bucket list as I looked out at the beach on Dover front and the familiar sea vista once again, but since our main business today was the castle, we hastened towards the ticket entrance. Our English Heritage membership served us well, saving us from having to pay £18.80 each and after walking up to the castle enclosure within the impressive curtain walls, we were soon enjoying a cappuccino in the Great Tower Café.

After that, it was time to start exploring, having read briefly about the castle's history. The chalk of Castle Hill, with its natural strategic view of the sea, originally lent itself to massive earthworks, mounds and ditches and is most likely to have been the site of an Iron Age hill fort. Immediately after his Battle of Hastings victory in October 1066, William the Conqueror (who is allegedly my 26th great-grandfather according to recent ancestry investigations) had the defences there strengthened with an earthwork and timber castle.

In the 1180s, King Henry II had the castle remodelled, constructing a great tower that doubled as added fortification and a palace in which to entertain important visitors. It was 83 feet/25.3 metres high, just short of 100 feet/30 metres square and had walls up to 21 feet/6.5 metres thick. There were three floors of rooms, with the topmost being state apartments for the king. There's no doubt it must have been most impressive in its day. As it happened, the aptly named Great Tower was impressive enough today and also impossible to miss – so we didn't!

I hadn't managed quite as much pre-visit research as I would have liked, so I was very pleased to find some history relating directly to Henry II, who along with Eleanor of Aquitaine, happened to be the subject of my holiday reading.

English Heritage had clearly put a great deal of effort into re-creating a medieval royal palace, with richly-coloured wall hangings, furniture and furnishings in the banqueting hall and bedchambers. There was a lot to look at and although there was a purposeful absence of information panels, I was entranced.

In the Great Tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

Sumptuous (photo by Alan Santillo)

On the second floor, there was a chapel dedicated to Thomas Becket. He had been the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1162, until in 1170 he had been most brutally slaughtered in front of the altar at Canterbury Cathedral, by four of King Henry II's household knights. It's largely considered that in order to counter a growing cult dedicated to the martyred Thomas, King Henry II had strategically invested in the chapel with its richly decorated stonework. It was a lovely chapel occupying a secluded space, although a little too dark for a photo to do it justice.

Despite the prominent sumptuousness of the grander rooms, there were plenty of furnished 'working rooms' to show how this had been a fully-functioning castle. I was also delighted to spot graffiti on the stone walls. It seemed to vary in style, typically consisting of names and dates, but there were other areas of intriguing patterns and shapes. Some of it was deeply cut into the wall, with the majority of it dating to the 1700s, when the keep had been used as a military prison.

Graffiti

Then there were the medieval tunnels. After a long siege in 1216-1217 when Dover Castle had barely managed to withstand invaders, the tunnels had been built to improve its defence capabilities. Today, though, as we attempted to explore their dank eeriness winding through the castle bedrock, we seemed to be assailed by group after group of swarming schoolchildren.

I genuinely think it's marvellous for children to visit places that will greatly aid their learning, but sometimes it can be to the detriment of adult paying visitors who might have travelled a long way (like us) and who will never come this far again. The noise they generate is one thing, but sometimes the lack of respect they show for others/elders, especially in places like castles with uneven floors and winding staircases, can frankly be dangerous.

However, it was time to ascend to the top of the tower and gaze through the crenellations upon extensive views of the Dover once so familiar to us, both inland to the sprawling town and seaward towards the harbour and beyond. It was up here that a group of eight or so teenage Germans were *so* rude, by pushing in to where we were already standing. There was also an incident with a pusher-past while we waited patiently in a short queue to descend the narrow stairway safely, after a group of people had come up. I was losing faith in human decency…

By then it was lunchtime, so we took our somewhat disgruntled selves back to the Great Tower Café that was fairly crowded, but still pleasant enough to sit in and share a cheese toastie and a granary roll, together with a cold drink. We didn't linger, though, as we were raring to visit the famous secret war tunnels that had opened to the public for the first time in 2015.

When England had deemed itself under threat of French invasion from Napoleon, with Dover a highly likely target, one solution had been to dig tunnels in the chalky cliffs at Dover Castle. This was achieved by 1803, when underground barracks there housed up to 2,000 officers and soldiers. The threat failed to materialise at that time, but 135 years later there was another threat of invasion from Nazi Germany and this time the tunnels were utilised to great effect.

By May 1940, the entire British Expeditionary Force had become trapped at Dunkirk in northern France in mortal danger and the responsibility for bringing the stranded soldiers home to England fell to the head of Dover Naval Command, from where it was based in the old tunnels. Operation Dynamo was thus born and over the course of only nine days, around 338,000 soldiers in Royal Naval vessels and the famous flotilla of civilian boats were delivered home safely to England, in what must have seemed no less than a mini-miracle.

It was a fairly steep walk down to the tunnels, where we joined an already-formed queue for the next guided tour. We were in a group with some New Zealand people from a cruise ship and they were so friendly and polite that it quite restored my faith in human nature. After a cloudy morning, the sun was beginning to make an appearance and it was becoming hot, so I was glad when after about a 25-minute wait, we finally entered the cool dimness of the tunnels.

No photography was allowed, as we were led into specific rooms within the tunnels, several in which we sat down and watched a short film of wartime footage. Some rooms were kitted out the way they would have been, bringing it all to life, especially with the wartime narrative in the background. The staff must have been working on adrenaline, eating and sleeping in the tunnels and completing 24- or 36-hour shifts in dim lighting conditions whilst under intense pressure.

The tour lasted for about 45 minutes and we enjoyed it so much that we decided to join the queue for the nearby underground hospital tunnels straight away. It was even hotter standing there this time for about 20 minutes, but once again, it was well worth the wait. We were led to various tunnels that had been used for injured personnel and the narrative this time was the story of an injured army man on his journey through the hospital system.

There were stretchers, medical supply cupboards, wards with bunk beds and an operating theatre, as well as sleeping and eating facilities. During the tour, there was an 'air raid' with lights flashing on and off to simulate the experience. There were relevant odours to conjure up cooking and also in the operating theatre, after a warning that anyone who felt uneasy or faint in the operating theatre should tell the guide – presumably this has happened in the past.

A concluding talk from the guide gave us some interesting facts, including how there were 3½ miles of interconnecting tunnels; there were originally ten wards and two operating theatres, but as the need for the hospital lessened after Dunkirk, there were just two wards and one operating theatre; and for a few months after the war, the tunnels had been used as a maternity hospital. We were finally told we had to climb 75 steps to the exit…

We were tiring by the time we re-emerged into the sunlight, but still had enough energy to go and see an Admiralty command look-out post on the cliff-top nearby.

From here there was a wonderful view of the harbour and beyond, which was a perfect place for look-outs to monitor the huge volume of shipping during the evacuation. There was so much sea traffic that usual harbour procedures were abandoned and vessels had to make their own way as best they could.

We hadn't finished with the visit, but were in dire need of refreshment, so walked back to the castle, passing under Colton's Tower and stopping to take a photo:

Colton's Tower

This was the place through which Roman and Saxon (and also possibly Iron Age) predecessors had once entered the castle. It now stands proudly displaying its ancient looking octagonal turret, but has undergone a lot of alteration over the centuries and its arch now apparently has an Edwardian look. To be honest, I'm not entirely sure I would have noticed, I simply admired it anyway.

At the now almost empty Great Tower Café, we sat inside for the third time and enjoyed a hot drink with some appropriately fortifying chocolatey flapjack, which gave us an instant energy boost. I was intrigued in what we were about to see, which I'd previously had no inkling was to be found at Dover Castle until I'd looked at the information leaflet we'd been given on arrival.

There was an eight-sided Roman lighthouse – or pharos – standing on the highest part of Castle Hill, which would once have guided Roman ships into the harbour below. It was originally one of a pair built in around 46-50 AD. Nowadays it's one of only three surviving lighthouses from the entire Roman Empire and the most complete standing Roman building in England. I couldn't quite believe we'd never heard of it before and was delighted at this unexpected find.

Very close beside it stands the church of St-Mary-in-Castro, originally known to be the site of a Roman building that most likely had an association with the manning of the pharos. The church and lighthouse have an intimate connection (not only in proximity) as tiles from the Roman pharos were later re-used in the church, built circa 1000 AD in the late Saxon period. Later in the mid-13th century, the pharos was connected to the church by a short passage and used as a bell tower. I'm not sure if that's sacrilege, or purely practical.

As we approached the church and lighthouse, the red brick and pale stone of the church, with the unusual shape of the ancient lighthouse, was a rare sight indeed:

Old church and ancient lighthouse

We first entered the church, which has seen a number of changes over the years. In 1226, King Henry III instructed that the church be repaired and updated, which included adding three new altars and becoming a repository of sacred relics.

St-Mary-in-Castro Church (photo by Alan Santillo)

Today, several visitors were milling around the interior, despite the absence of relics (although I was feeling a little decrepit). The building had been restored again in 1582, but by the 17th century it was sadly falling into decay. In 1780 it was being utilised as a cooperage and storehouse, but it collapsed in 1801 and by 1808 had ended up as a coal store. After this ignominious decline, it was finally restored to its original purpose in the later 19th century.

As a church, it had always served the local army barracks and the army link had been obvious as soon as we'd stepped inside. It was used as the Dover garrison church until 2014 and is still a place of worship. I have to confess that encroaching fatigue meant I failed to take as much notice of everything as I would have liked, but I do remember it was unusual and pretty and felt very peaceful.

The sky was still blue when we left the church to investigate the lighthouse more closely. It stands at nearly 52 feet/15.8 metres high and is 40 feet/12.2 metres at its base. Peering curiously inside, the cool interior was basically a large hollow space, with evidence of five Roman levels that originally had a floor or balcony.

According to Roman historians, it may originally have been eight levels high. It was astonishing to imagine a beacon of fire burning at the top of the pharos each night, to guide Roman shipping safely into harbour. Respect to the Romans.

By then, it was 16:15 and time for us to navigate our way safely back to our accommodation. After a brief foray in the imaginatively stocked gift shop, where I may have made a purchase or two, we bade a fond farewell to Dover Castle, after having been there for a creditable 5½ hours. I was so glad we'd made it inside the castle grounds at last and it had been a much fuller experience than I'd imagined, with the tunnels, lighthouse and church.

Unfortunately, the journey back was bordering on horrendous, beset with traffic problems, including the M2 closed between two junctions and an accident on the M20 that had knock-on effects all over the place. I suppose it was a case of no pain, no gain – but we were *so* glad to arrive at Little Melrose!

Farewell Dover Castle

Wednesday 10th July - Day 5

We awoke to another sky of fairly dense white cloud, but it was warm with a reasonable forecast, so we decided to have a restful, quiet garden day. The chosen site was Sissinghurst Castle Garden, previously rushed through in 1982 courtesy of my father-in-law. I was looking forward to a mindful and appreciative wander around such an acclaimed garden, as befits a couple of mature years, who over the last couple of decades have developed a real passion for gardens!

It took us 25 minutes or so on roads that were much quieter than yesterday – if not bumpier and winding, which can be highly unnerving when driving around a bend to come face to face with a lorry coming the other way. The garden itself wasn't open until 11:00, but the grounds and café were open at 10:00, so we passed the time with a cappuccino and a walk around the grounds.

I already knew a fair bit about Sissinghurst from television, as well as from books by and about Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962), but there was a lot more to discover. Vita and her husband Harold Nicolson (1886-1968), a diplomat, author and politician, had purchased Sissinghurst in 1930. They had together set about renovating the house and garden into what has ended up as one of the National Trust's most visited sites and a garden of worldwide renown, as well as still being a working farm, with sheep, cattle and pigs.

We firstly walked to the boathouse and along the moat, part of which is all that remains of the original house. The sky was trying to clear with partial success, so we retraced our steps to the farmyard, where oast houses created a typical Kentish scene, alongside a large barn. This was the Elizabethan barn, made of Tudor brick and with a clay tile roof, once used as a hospital for French prisoners who were held at Sissinghurst in the Seven Years' War (1756-1763).

The Elizabethan barn (photo by Alan Santillo)

I liked the wildflower planting in that area and tried in vain to take a good enough photo, but gave up when I saw it was 11:00 and time to enter the revered garden. What first caught my eye, though, was the building, especially the red brick Elizabethan tower with its two octagonal turrets and its fascinating history.

The earliest owners are recorded as being the de Saxinhersts in the 12th century, with 'hurst' being a Saxon term for an enclosed wood. At some point, it's likely that an originally timber-constructed dwelling was later updated to a brick manor and by the end of the 13th century, the estate belonged to the de Berhams. King Edward I is thought to have stayed there in 1305 and in 1490, the de Berham family sold the manor to Thomas Baker of Cranbrook. Over the following decades, many additions and improvements were made. The famous tower was added in the 1560s and in 1573, Queen Elizabeth I was entertained at Sissinghurst.

The property fell into decline after the English Civil War (1642-1651) and by the time of the Seven Years' War, it was reduced to a prisoner of war camp. In around 1800, the Mann family purchased the estate and much of the Elizabethan house was demolished, with its brick and stone being re-used throughout the area. The remaining buildings became a workhouse and by the 20th century, it was a farmstead housing farm labourers. It was put up for sale in 1928 for £12,000.

It received no offers for two years, but in 1930, Vita saw the property and recognised its potential, despite what she described as "squalor and slovenly disorder everywhere." She and Harold purchased the 450 acres of Sissinghurst for £12,375, using only Vita's money. Apart from the house with no electricity, drains or running water, along with the garden in complete disarray, the site also consisted of four buildings of mellow brick, part of a moat and some fine walls.

Harold and Vita set about creating their home, dealing with ground clearance that took almost three years. Harold planned the garden design, while Vita took charge of the planting. Apart from the White Garden, the greater part of the garden was completed by 1939. It first opened to the public for two days in mid-1938, after which opening hours gradually increased, with visitors placing a shilling in a bowl at the gate. Harold was less keen on their visitors than Vita, who despite her love of privacy, came to enjoy meeting the "shillingses", as the visitors were known.

Since it was soon after opening, we made our way to the tower and ascended the 78 steps to the top, to gaze out at the bird's-eye view of the scene below:

View from the tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

Also of interest in the tower was graffiti drawn by French prisoners in the mid-18th century. I enjoyed peering into Vita's private sanctuary and writing room, found off the wooden spiral staircase and still furnished and arranged as it had been while she was alive. Vita had once confided in her mother that she would like to live alone in a tower with her books, which turned into a reality after the start of World War II. She would spend much of her time writing novels in the tower, as well as creating the wonderful garden, so her ambition was substantially realised.

In another room off the staircase, was an exhibition about the marriage of Vita and Harold, who were quite an unconventional couple. They married in 1913, but both pursued multiple, mainly same-gender affairs, with each other's consent. Their marriage lasted for 50 years and seemed to suit them both, so it was successful by definition. Even Sissinghurst estate buildings were used unusually, with different areas designated for different rooms and family members.

World War II saw changes at Sissinghurst farm, one of them being the presence of the Women's Land Army to help with ongoing farm tasks, such as milking the shorthorn dairy herd. Vita herself became involved in the welfare and organisation of the Women's Land Army in Kent. She and Harold also witnessed much of the Battle of Britain, fought mainly over the Channel and the fields nearby.

However, there were no battles today as we walked around the garden. Vita and Harold had wanted a formal structure with extensive views, as well as a sense of privacy and intimacy. The garden was thus divided into separate enclosures, such as the Rose Garden, the Orchard, the Cottage Garden, the Nuttery and the famous White Garden. I'm not sure in what order we walked, but I didn't care!

The White Garden under a pale blue sky

A hint of pink adds to the whiteness

What I remember most of all was the enveloping sense of other-worldly beauty as soon as I stepped inside the White Garden. It was far more than just an array of white planting, it was like a three-dimensional experience of clarity and soul. Yes, the garden had soul! It was even more astonishing because a white garden had previously sounded so boring to me. For sure there were shades of silver, grey and cream amongst hints of pink and peach, but the overall effect was definitely white and walking through the garden on narrow pathways between tall clumps and mounds was exhilarating. I simply didn't want to leave.

However, it was midday and time to fortify the body, since the garden had fortified the soul. We left the garden to seek out lunch in a restaurant that had been the old granary, where we managed to sit by a window that looked out on some wildflower planting. Even though the restaurant was already rather crowded and it felt hot, some home-made pea and mint soup with granary bread was all that we needed to feel pleasantly revitalised.

Continuing with the Sackville-West story, Vita died at her beloved Sissinghurst in 1962. Harold was devastated and it was said that he lived there unhappily until his own death in 1968. Their son Nigel had inherited Sissinghurst after Vita's death and disliking the separate buildings used for accommodation, he went ahead and built a large family home, where he lived until his death in 2004. In 1967, however, he had transferred Sissinghurst to the National Trust. Nigel's son and his wife thereafter sought to transform the Sissinghurst estate into a productive mixed farm, producing meat, fruit, vegetables and cereal for the National Trust restaurant. That soup had been most excellent!

After lunch, we returned to the gazebo we'd espied earlier, perched on the corner of the moat. This singular construction had been built in 1969 by Nigel and his brother Benedict, as a memorial to their father, Harold Nicolson. Nigel had used it as a private summer office, where he could sit at his desk and gaze across the water. Today the scene was set with books, papers and a typewriter. I was intrigued to learn it was where Nigel had written about his parents in his book, *Portrait of a Marriage*, which I'd read almost 30 years ago.

The writing gazebo on the moat (photo by Alan Santillo)

Reluctant to leave the peaceful Sissinghurst ambience, we returned to the garden and enjoyed more flower photography, while meandering happily amongst the beds. A final look inside the sitting room of the house that was open to the public more or less brought our visit to a close, apart from a quick inspection of the gift shop, which had formerly been the piggery.

There was no doubt that I loved Sissinghurst. It had truly touched my gardener's heart. As we drove back to Little Melrose, I wondered on a more mundane level if I could include Sissinghurst Castle Garden, to give it its full title, into my list of visited castles. It appears that those French sailors, imprisoned in the tower, had named it 'le chateau' and their nickname had stuck. Fair enough, but it didn't matter. I'd seen the White Garden and was one happy gardener.

Thursday 11th July - Day 6

A silly habit seems to be developing, of falling asleep in front of the television and then not being able to sleep for a long time when in bed. However, this is a minor complaint, along with the flush that this morning resembled a clamorous yak with nasal complications. Therefore, when we saw a modicum of sunshine, we girded our bits and pieces to tick off another 'biggie' on our list, namely Leeds Castle.

I'd actually managed to research the history of this significant building before our visit and although we had to pay a rather steep entrance fee of £24 each, the castle was both historically important and only about 25 minutes away. I thus made sandwiches for a picnic lunch, while the sky sulkily reverted to its customary thick white cloud, although there were still some reluctant patches of blue showing through. Regardless of the cloud situation, it seemed very warm.

We left at 09:15 in case the traffic was problematic, but it wasn't. The ticket office wasn't open until 10:00, so we had a small wait. Quite a few people were already there and after paying a call at a decidedly malodorous toilet, we were allowed in. The fee paying was smooth, although I wondered why our photos had to be taken. It turns out it was for the "sole purpose of ensuring the validity of tickets on presentation", although it did feel ever so slightly intrusive.

As it happened, we were simply pleased to be there. We were soon enjoying an unhurried walk of 10 minutes or so along to the castle itself, on a path amid verdant trees, a lake, a picturesque red bridge, flower beds in the distance and hundreds of birds. Really, hundreds of birds, in and out of the lake – swans, geese, ducks, pigeons – eek! The ornithophobia was alive and flapping its wings as I was forced to pick my way gingerly amongst feathers underfoot. There were also black swans, because the last owner of the castle had been exceptionally fond of birds…

As we approached, the castle looked majestically handsome rising up from its large, surrounding moat. Since it was still a little before its opening time of 10:30, we decided to walk on to the nearby café for a cappuccino and a shared slice of cake, before returning to take that sought-after but elusive photo of the castle before hundreds of tourists wandered around en masse:

Handsome Leeds Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

It happened to be Leeds Castle's 900th anniversary, as the first stone castle had been constructed in 1119 – although a Saxon chief called Led had apparently built a wooden structure on two islands in a lake as far back as the 9th century. If this was indeed so and Led's wooden structure had been erected in 819, should it perhaps have been Leeds Castle's 1200th anniversary?

The 1086 Domesday Book had listed a manor on the site, after which the stone castle of 1119 acted as a Norman stronghold, naturally using the rocky outcrops that formed the two islands. The main fortification of the keep was on the smaller island, with the bailey and its more domestic buildings on the larger island. A drawbridge linked the islands, to protect the keep when necessary.

In 1278, major improvements were made when the castle became a royal palace for King Edward I and his queen, Eleanor of Castile. The barbican was constructed of three parts, each having its own entrance, gateway, drawbridge and portcullis. The building on the smaller island was developed into a keep, incorporating the great hall and apartments for the king and queen. It was known as the 'gloriette', considered a Spanish term in honour of the queen. Alternatively the term may derive from the 12th-century French 'gloire' meaning 'little room'.

Soon after we entered the castle grounds, we paid £3.25 each to hire an audio guide and although this was turning into quite an expensive visit (and English Heritage charge nothing for their audio guides), I was glad to pay up and take advantage of all the extra information it gave.

L-R: new castle, bridge corridors, clock tower & keep/gloriette

The tour took us around to where bridge corridors allowed direct access between the new castle built in 1822 and the gloriette that sat gracefully upon the lake. I regret to say that I found myself thinking how the word 'gloriette' sounded rather unfortunately like some sort of medieval toilet facility.

However, the audio guide swiftly moved us on (as well as the other visitors following behind us) and we entered the atmospherically dank and uneven Norman cellar, which is the earliest part of the castle dating from the early 12th century.

Cellars were naturally very important for storing certain items during long periods of siege, including dried or salted meat, fruit, firewood and straw. Another necessity was wax, which had to be kept cool and dry in order to make candles to provide the castle rooms with light at night. I'd never considered the importance of wax before – the smaller details of history are so fascinating. Large barrels were used to store wine and beer, which was no doubt another necessity. Wine for current castle events is still stored in the cellar to date.

Leeds Castle has been referred to as both "the loveliest castle in the world" and "the castle of queens and queen of castles." I'm not at all sure about the first title, considering the number of other iconic and exceptionally handsome castles in existence, but the second title is one that has factual roots in history, having been home to several medieval queens.

After Eleanor of Castile died in 1290, King Edward I married Margaret, who was the daughter of King Philip III of France. He granted her Leeds Castle, which from then on formed part of the dower of several kings of England. However, King Edward II's wife, Queen Isabella, came into ownership of the castle by a somewhat stormy route, retaining it until her death in 1358.

As for King Edward III, he decided for some reason not to grant the castle to his queen, Philippa of Hainault, although King Richard II did grant it in 1382 to his queen, Anne of Bohemia. His son, King Henry IV, in turn gave the castle to his queen, Joan of Navarre, who subsequently gave the castle to the Archbishop of Canterbury (odd) and was later accused of witchcraft by her stepson, King Henry V (odder still). As well as becoming decidedly confusing, it was beginning to sound like a script for *Evil Medieval Kingenders*.

When King Henry V died in France from dysentery in 1422, he bequeathed Leeds Castle to his young queen, Catherine de Valois. She was the youngest daughter of King Charles VI of France and the mother of the infant King Henry VI. Although a dowager queen, Catherine engaged in a longstanding relationship with the infamous Welshman Owen Tudor (Owain ap Maredudd ap Tudur in Welsh), who had originally been employed by King Henry V in the royal household and was afterwards appointed Clerk of the Wardrobe by Catherine herself.

She was warned of the folly of such an affair, but paid no heed. There also seems to be no evidence that they actually married, but their son was Henry Tudor, who eventually became King Henry VII in 1485 and began the Tudor period. Catherine, incidentally, owned Leeds Castle until her death in 1437.

All this history was confusing, but the rooms that we were being audially guided around were beautifully furnished to give an excellent impression of how they would have looked. The Queen's Room was elegantly colourful with damask wall hangings and bed draperies incorporating the monogram HC, entwined with a lover's knot, to represent the marriage of King Henry V and Catherine de Valois in 1420 – there was even an adjoining bathroom.

The Queen's Room (photo by Alan Santillo)

The Queen's Gallery was also impressive with a rather more practical look. The fireplace dated from King Henry VIII's era, with his and Catherine of Aragon's heraldic arms carved in each corner of the stonework. Four marble busts of Henry and his three children (Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I) were prominently displayed, dating from around the mid-16th century.

The ceiling beams were also noteworthy, carved with unusual designs of grapes and serpents. I would have liked to scrutinise them more closely, but the number of visitors passing through the rooms had steadily increased. This also meant it was proving somewhat tricky to take a photo of a historic room without a visitor in brightly modern clothing suddenly appearing in a doorway!

I had a little more photographic success in Henry VIII's impressive Banqueting Hall, which is the largest room in the castle. He was probably the castle's most notoriously famous owner, who proceeded to transform it from an originally fortified stronghold to a royal palace for his first wife, Catherine of Aragon.

The maiden's tower was built in about 1544, in order to house the queen's maids of honour, one of whom was Anne Boleyn from nearby Hever Castle. I feel sorry for Catherine, who seemed to be a victim of dynastic ideals and ambitious power.

Henry VIII visited the castle often, staying there en route to Dover in 1520 for his famous meeting with Francis I of France at the Field of the Cloth of Gold. Apparently, the painting commemorating that momentous occasion hangs at Leeds Castle, but to my disappointment and chagrin, I failed either to find it or even to notice it. However, the remarkable tapestry from the early 16th century was hard to miss, even though I'm not particularly fond of tapestries.

Henry VIII's Banqueting Hall with its Tudor tapestry

Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) was held prisoner at the castle for a short while before she was proclaimed Queen of England, but after almost 30 years of royal ownership, Leeds Castle was granted in 1552 to Sir Anthony Leger for an annual rental of £10. This was in recognition of his services to King Edward VI (who died in 1553 age 15) in subjugating the uprising in Ireland.

The castle changed ownership many times throughout the next two centuries, thankfully managing to escape destruction during the English Civil War (1642-1651) because its owner at the time, with the glorious name of Sir Cheney Culpeper, was a Parliamentarian. This was indeed fortunate (for the castle at least) because other members of the Culpeper family happened to be Royalists.

However, the castle did suffer significant damage during the 1660s, when Lord Culpeper leased it to the government as a place of detention for Dutch and French prisoners of war. They were kept in the gloriette (a disaster waiting to happen) and proceeded to set it on fire. The damage was severe and the gloriette had partially collapsed before the next major building programme in 1822.

More owners and more improvements followed, until the castle belonged to Fiennes Wykeham Martin (another stand-out name). Apart from repairing the gloriette, he demolished the main house and had replaced it by 1823 with the Tudor style one as it appears today. More lands were acquired over the years, with Leeds becoming one of the largest private estates in Kent. In 1926, the castle became the property of its last private owner, the Honourable Olive Paget, an American heiress, who became Lady Baillie after her third marriage.

Extensive interior and exterior alterations ensued, in the style of a mainly medieval castle with shades of Gothic fantasy. Later alterations, however, were more inclined to grand interiors in the French style (with a lot of birds). During the 1930s, Leeds Castle was known as one of England's great country houses, offering hospitality to film stars, European royalty and leading statesmen. I wonder if any of them suffered from ornithophobia?

During the early part of World War II, although Lady Baillie did her best to continue with life as she knew it, the castle was part-used as a hospital. Many Dunkirk survivors found themselves at Leeds Castle and it was also used as a recovery centre for severely burned airmen. It must have been an incredible culture shock, both for Lady Baillie and the patients. After the war, Lady Baillie continued interior improvements, including a new dining room and library.

On her death in 1974, Lady Baillie left the castle and its grounds to a private charitable trust known as the Leeds Castle Foundation, with the aim of preserving the site for future generations to enjoy. Its first public opening was in 1976. I was definitely enjoying the visit, but I have to confess to overload by the time the tour had progressed to the upper floor, with the boardroom, seminar room and Lady Baillie's rooms. They were interesting, very interesting, but for some reason earlier history fascinates me at a much deeper level.

Lady Baillie was known as a private person who shunned publicity and for that, I liked her. However, her love of birds was something I couldn't share, especially when we left the castle to find a place outside for eating our picnic lunch. The sky was mostly blue and it was quite hot as we found a shady spot under a tree on a grassy bank, with a serene view. However, it quickly became obvious that we were the focus of attention of many birds. They weren't big or aggressive like seagulls, but they were mostly black and an increasing number of them approached as each minute passed, pacing the grass around us.

I tried to be calm, but found it necessary to stand up while I ate my sandwich, so that I was ready to take flight at any given moment (which sounds pleasingly ironic). My packet of crisps was secreted in my bag, while I dipped into it in a ridiculously surreptitious manner, defying the marauding birds. It wasn't the best of lunchtimes and it wasn't a patch on Hever Castle – but the view was magnificent and just about worth the bird-inspired adrenaline:

Our serene lunchtime view (without birds)

In order to find some tranquillity, we decided to mosey along to the garden area and down some steps into what is nowadays called Lady Baillie's Mediterranean-style garden. It had once been the site of her aviary, but to my relief it was now a terraced delight, designed by the landscape architect Christopher Carter and opened in 1999. It would have been perfect for a quiet lunchtime, with many secluded places in which to sit and eat amongst the flowers, while looking out at the idyllic scene. Hindsight is a wonderful thing…

View from a terrace to the Great Water

We strolled along the terraces admiring colourful planting that hinted at the sub-tropical, with banana trees, big cacti and plants not normally seen in the UK. The terraces led down to a lake known as the Great Water, along which the Black Swan ferry took visitors from the castle drive to the maze and play areas. If I'd had more energy (and maybe a grandchild in tow), I would have investigated the maze with its exit via a grotto, but as it was, I was loving the terraces.

Suitably relaxed, we returned up the steps to the Culpeper Garden, occupying the site of the castle's kitchen garden. It had been transformed into a large cottage garden in 1980 by the landscape gardener Russell Page, taking its name from the family who owned the castle in the 17th century. It was hot and it was stunning, with an abundance of beautiful hollyhocks, which lifted the soul – as well as the temperature, as the sun was full-on by then.

Hollyhocks!

It was a wonderful end to the visit and it's no surprise that visitors come from all around the world to take in such a prominent place of English history. It felt special – quite expensive, but so special that a retrospective guide book was purchased!

Friday 12th July – Day 7

After a fairly hectic week, we wanted a more easy-going day and decided on a National Trust 14th-century moated manor house. After a final flushing of the now familiar honking herbivore, we departed in intermittent sunshine for a 25-minute drive along mostly bumpy, winding roads, to which we were now accustomed.

The sudden appearance of the odd lorry and other badly driven vehicles careering towards us at speed was alarming, so we were glad to arrive at Ightham Mote at 10:00, when the café and grounds opened an hour before the house itself.

A cappuccino and shared slice of cake disappeared quickly and we were soon walking down a fairly steep incline to where an astonishing Tudor-type manor house was sitting proudly within its moat. It was larger than expected and its importance was clear to see, having retained most of its original features. Dating from around 1320, it had been built with Kentish ragstone and dull red brick – a brilliant example of how such houses would have appeared in the Middle Ages.

Its earliest known owner was Sir Thomas Cawne, who was a prominent soldier in the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) and knighted for his services. His son Robert inherited the property, but was sent to the Tower of London for attempting to kill his wife by throwing her into a well. He was eventually pardoned, but little is known of him afterwards. Maybe somebody threw him into a well?

Ightham Mote within its moat (photo by Alan Santillo)

After his death, his sister Alice inherited Ightham Mote, which passed to Nicholas Haute upon her marriage to him. Nicholas held important offices in the county and the king's service, in due course becoming the Sheriff of Kent and an MP. The property was then inherited by their son William, whose second wife was Joan Woodville, aunt to Elizabeth Woodville, who was the wife of King Edward IV and who became queen consort of England in 1464.

William and Joan's son Richard inherited Ightham Mote, greatly enlarging and improving the house. Being the cousin of Elizabeth Woodville and his subsequent importance in the county and at court, he turned Ightham Mote into a fashionable home as befitted his status, with inner and outer courtyards, reception rooms and high-quality guest accommodation. His estates were seized in 1483 when he was accused of rebellion, but were later returned in 1485 when he was pardoned.

Richard's brother Edward inherited the property in 1487, but managed to amass large debts that resulted in him having to sell the family home. Richard Clement, a self-made man with influential friends, then purchased Ightham Mote for £400 in 1521. He remained the owner until his death in 1538, earning himself a reputation for leading a colourful life, which included two wives, at least two mistresses, three illegitimate children and a career in the royal court.

He was an ambitious man and by 1529 had been knighted by King Henry VIII. In the 1520s, he instigated a lot of building work at Ightham Mote, including stained-glass windows and a striking Tudor chapel with a wooden barrel roof, painted with Tudor roses and symbols representing Catherine of Aragon. His allegiance to Henry VIII was clear, as he was present at Anne Boleyn's coronation in 1533, but he also had a hand in her demise in 1536. However, his allegiance and romantic meanderings came to no avail, as his own demise came a mere two years later.

The Selby family were the next known owners of Ightham Mote, from 1591 to 1889. Dame Dorothy Selby was a lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth I, while her husband Sir William was one of the first officials to welcome James Stuart (originally spelt Stewart) to England as the new king in 1603.

The Selbys weren't without controversy, however, as during a time of extreme religious sensitivity, the local church minister accused Sir William of favouring the Catholic faith. He fell under further suspicion due to a request for permission to worship at home because of gout. Who knows what the truth may have been?

As Sir William and Dame Dorothy were childless, the sought-after manor house passed to various other family members and by the end of the 18th century, some distant cousins even changed their name to Selby in order to inherit. Another hint of scandal occurred when Thomas Selby owned Ightham Mote from 1791 to 1820. He disinherited his only son Charles, who had become a missionary on the Isles of Scilly. Charles had not only had a disagreement with some islanders, but had also fathered an illegitimate son. Were the two situations perhaps connected?

By 1889, the notable Selby family had run out of money and Ightham Mote was sold to Thomas Colyer-Fergusson. Much repair and restoration ensued after centuries of neglect and the property was even opened to the public for one afternoon a week in the early 20th century. Tragically, Thomas lost a son in each World War and without an heir who could take on the responsibility, Ightham Mote was once again sold and its contents auctioned.

After a period of uncertainty, an American named Charles Henry Robinson became the latest and last independent owner. He had admired the house when stationed nearby during World War II and set about making many repairs, eventually leaving it to the National Trust upon his death in 1985. An ambitious conservation project then took place, the end result of which we were about to investigate.

First of all, we wandered around the back of the house, where the buildings of the stable courtyard looked just as old and delicious as the manor house. An open grass area and lovely old stone walls with narrow flower borders softened the buildings to create a feeling of space and cared-for antiquity. From a distance, I could see visitors going inside where there seemed to be information boards, but we spent so long waiting around to take photos with no people, that we decided to come back to the stable courtyard later. Bad decision!

The stable courtyard (photo by Alan Santillo)

As it was just past 11:00, the house had opened and we entered with anticipation. After declining the offer of a tour, in order to wander around freely taking photos at our own pace, I wondered if we'd made another bad decision – and I have to say that if the chance ever came again, I would certainly follow a tour guide with all the snippets of information you never glean from only having access to a map and information sheets. I maintain that we need two visits to places, one for photos and another to take in everything properly.

The house had more than 70 rooms arranged around a central courtyard and I found myself wishing yet again that I wasn't nearly as spatially challenged as I am, so that I could have some idea of where I was in relation to … anything. However, the whole effect of the house was a historic delight and I felt I could never be sure what I'd be stumbling upon next. Pevsner, the architectural historian famous for his county-by-county guides, described it as "the most complete small medieval manor house in the county." He's not wrong.

I loved the old wooden panelling, as some of it was exquisitely carved, along with atmospheric beamed ceilings. The most astonishing ceiling in the entire building, however, was in the chapel. Strips of colourful Tudor images depicting what seemed to be roses, portcullises and forts decorated the domed heights. There were information sheets, but I was so intent on taking a photo, that I failed to take in much information and internet research seems disappointingly sparse. The whole of the chapel felt meaningful in its own way.

The astonishing chapel ceiling (photo by Alan Santillo)

One unusual place of interest was a spine-chilling void that was accessed only by a hatch, which gave way to a 13 feet/4 metres drop to the earth floor below. Remnants of rough rendering on the walls have added to speculation that its purpose was probably similar to that of an oubliette. Taken from the French word 'oublier', meaning 'to forget', an oubliette was a secret dungeon with sole access being a ceiling trapdoor, where prisoners were dumped and literally forgotten. However, such dungeons are generally associated with medieval castles, while archaeologists believe this particular oubliette (or otherwise) had been created in around 1856, when the chimney and fireplace had been put in.

Another place I was intrigued in was a very small bedroom upstairs in what was called the tower corridor. Visitors weren't allowed to enter, but could peer into the room to see the 16th-century panelling that would originally have been brightly coloured. It's thought the room was most probably built during Richard Clement's ownership – he of the colourful life who obviously liked wall panelling to match.

What fascinated me most about the room, though, was the fact that the author Henry James had slept there during a Christmas visit in 1887. It's reputed that his novel *The Turn of the Screw* was inspired from this stay – I could easily imagine him lying in bed in a small bedroom in a very old house with many shadowy corners and corridors, dreaming up a supernatural tale. I'm no fan of horror or suspense, but this novel was superbly written and I found it chilling in the extreme.

The courtyard

It wasn't at all chilly when we emerged into the courtyard, which is somewhat unusually surrounded completely by the house. Once again we loitered with photographic intent to grab a few moments when no visitors were in the shot. This gave us ample time to soak up the atmosphere of our surroundings, the buildings of which were originally constructed of timber before being rebuilt in stone. There was so much history in such a small spot on Earth.

I fell to wondering about the name of Ightham Mote and subsequent research indicates that it derives from a Saxon or Jute name 'Ehta' with the common suffix 'ham' meaning therefore 'Ehta's home'. As for the 'mote', it could either have been built on an ancient meeting place called a moot, or the more logical explanation that it was surrounded by a moat – a square moat surrounding the house on all sides and crossed by three bridges. Fascinating.

Lunchtime had approached, so we returned to the café for some fascinating refreshment, which turned out to be a cheese sandwich (me), a couscous salad (Alan) and a shared bottle of Sicilian lemonade. There was plenty of time to return to the area at the back of the house, to investigate the formal garden and the cut garden, which we happily did – although we completely forgot to investigate the interior of the stable courtyard buildings, as previously intended.

The formal garden

There were extended grounds where people had the opportunity to picnic, as well as a lake, orchard, natural play area and stumpery. As befitted our advancing years, however, we decided to bring to an end what had been a very surprising visit, not least because we hadn't known Ightham Mote even existed.

It felt special to see such an intact manor house from bygone centuries, which had been rescued by the National Trust from the ravages of time, death-watch beetle and acid rain. £10 million had been necessary for the restoration project between 1989-2002, so all I can say is thank heavens for the National Trust and our often vilified, but quietly and stoically amazing England.

Saturday 13th July – Day 8

I actually slept until 06:45 this morning and Alan's sinuses were also much improved. Maybe the holiday was working its relaxing magic after a week? A new day therefore beckoned, albeit with a silly sky of thick cloud consisting of many layers of varying shades of white. However, it was still warm, so Bodiam Castle it was, yet another National Trust gem. It was also another site previously visited with Alan's restive father. Either I hadn't been concentrating then, or it had been so brisk that I remember virtually nothing.

It thus felt like a first visit and it wasn't too far away, only 30 minutes or so along roads travelled previously to Scotney Castle. There were no traffic problems and before long we arrived near Robertsbridge in East Sussex, arriving at Bodiam Castle itself not long after 10:00 when the café opened. The obvious course of action was a cappuccino and this time a shared slice of lemon cake.

The wide gravel path leading to the castle was nearby and we were soon strolling along with cameras in hand, skirting the edges of the wide moat to find the best foreground for a photo. Yet again the lowering sky wasn't on my side, as there must be some superb views to be captured with a blue sky and some obliging fluffy white clouds. As it was, the large castle looked decidedly imposing rising from its completely surrounding water and was set within a landscape of trees that I could see gave way to fields on one side.

A moody Bodiam Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

It had originally been built in 1385 by Sir Edward Dalyngrigge (or Dallingridge according to the National Trust). As the youngest son, he was last in line to inherit anything from the Dalyngrigge estate, but he fortuitously married into a land-owning family and thus found himself the owner of the manor of Bodiam. As a successful knight from 1379 to 1388, during the reign of King Richard II, he was granted permission to build himself a castle.

The reason for such fortification was most probably due to the threat of French invasion during the Hundred Years War (1337-1453). It was undeniably a large project because the entire castle was built at the same time, meaning the style and design was unusually consistent. The whole endeavour included landscaped gardens with a variety of different waterways, so it was intended to serve as a fortified, but also comfortable and prestigious, home.

Sir Edward unfortunately died in 1395, not long after the castle must have been completed. It was then inherited by his son John, who like his father, was in the king's favour and was described as the 'King's Knight'. Since he and his wife had no children, the castle and estates were eventually passed to his cousin Richard in 1443. Richard also died without children, whereupon the Bodiam estate passed to Richard's sister Philippa in 1470.

Philippa was married to Sir Thomas Lewknor of a prominent Sussex family, who supported the Lancaster cause during the Wars of the Roses. When Richard III of York became king in 1483 after his success at the Battle of Bosworth, Thomas was accused of treason and a force was despatched to besiege Bodiam.

Whether a siege actually took place is unrecorded, although it's thought that Lewknor surrendered without much resistance. His property was confiscated, but it was returned when Henry VII became king in 1485 (although not all of the surrounding Bodiam land was returned until 1542). After this, although the castle remained in the Lewknor family for several generations through the 16th and 17th centuries, little is known of how it figured in their lives. This therefore indicates that nothing much of any significance occurred, which is often a good thing.

In 1623, most of the Bodiam estates were purchased by Sir Nicholas Tufton, later the Earl of Thanet. His son John inherited, but he was a Royalist in the Civil War (1642-1651) and sold Bodiam Castle for £6,000 to help pay fines that Parliament levied against him. It was purchased by Parliamentarian Nathaniel Powell in 1644.

The Civil War was a bad time for so many castles that were deliberately damaged to prevent them being used again for military gain. The degree of damage that this slighting caused varied from castle to castle, but fortunately for Bodiam, it was deemed enough to dismantle the bridges, the barbican and the buildings inside the castle. It's a crying shame that war wreaks such irreparable damage.

Nathaniel died in 1674/5 and ownership of the castle and its surroundings passed through the Powell family for a short while, until it was purchased in 1722 by Sir Thomas Webster. For over a century, the Webster family retained ownership, with the castle becoming popular as an overgrown, picturesque and romantic ruin, thanks to the growing interest in Gothic architecture.

The castle was sold for £3,000 in 1829 to John Fuller, who carried out partial repairs before it was sold to George Cubitt for £5,000 in 1849. It was then sold to Lord Curzon in 1916, who considered Bodiam Castle a rare treasure to be restored and revered. Much work ensued and upon his death in 1925, Lord Curzon donated Bodiam to the National Trust, with the proviso of opening the ruins to the public.

Since then, the National Trust has continued restoration work of this Grade 1 listed building that attracts thousands of visitors each year. I could vouch for that by the end of our visit, but by the time we'd finished strolling around the moat, we were still early enough to arrive at the bridge over the moat and be congratulated by the staff member on duty for being the first two visitors of the day.

That did have the advantage of person-free photos before the crowds arrived! I liked the inner castle, built neatly in a square around a large central courtyard, with round towers at each corner, a postern tower opposite the gatehouse and an east and west tower midway along the outer two walls.

L-R: great hall, postern tower & kitchen (photo by Alan Santillo)

Other people soon arrived, so we climbed the 56 steps up the postern tower, which gave us great views of the countryside and the castle below. I was also fascinated by a strange circular decoration on one of the walls and wondered if it was a witch mark – a protective symbol, found on doors and windows to ward off evil:

View from the postern tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

There was also graffiti that looked to be from visitors of bygone centuries, but other present-day visitors were already ascending the steps to the top of the tower and after they'd emerged, we made our descent. The steps had been particularly deep, resulting in some leg muscle weirdness for me after climbing down again. We therefore spent the next hour at ground level, having a good look around.

I appreciated the excellent information boards in strategic places that taught me a few fascinating facts. For instance, I read how the steward was considered the most important servant, keeping records of all the food and drink in the entire household, as well as recording everything bought for the castle. Money was counted on a checker cloth, hence the term 'chancellor of the exchequer'.

At the postern gate, I learned that this was sometimes known as the sally port, because it offered an escape route from where people in dire straits could escape, or in the parlance of old times, could 'sally forth'. I really enjoyed taking photos of interesting walls, arches and window apertures, as well as ovens and realised I particularly like old and carefully carved window apertures:

Withstanding the test of time

In the great hall was a platform or dais where the most important people would have sat, literally at the top table, with a great chair for the lord of the feast. The tables would have been trestles or boards covered with fine linen. The lord, sitting in his chair at the top board, was therefore chairman of the board. Neat.

Meanwhile, an elaborate vessel containing expensive salt would have stood in the middle of the esteemed top table. Those at the top table were consequently referred to as 'above the salt', while those of lesser importance were therefore 'below the salt'. I'm pretty sure I know what my salt status would have been, although Alan seemed to think he was from the higher echelons:

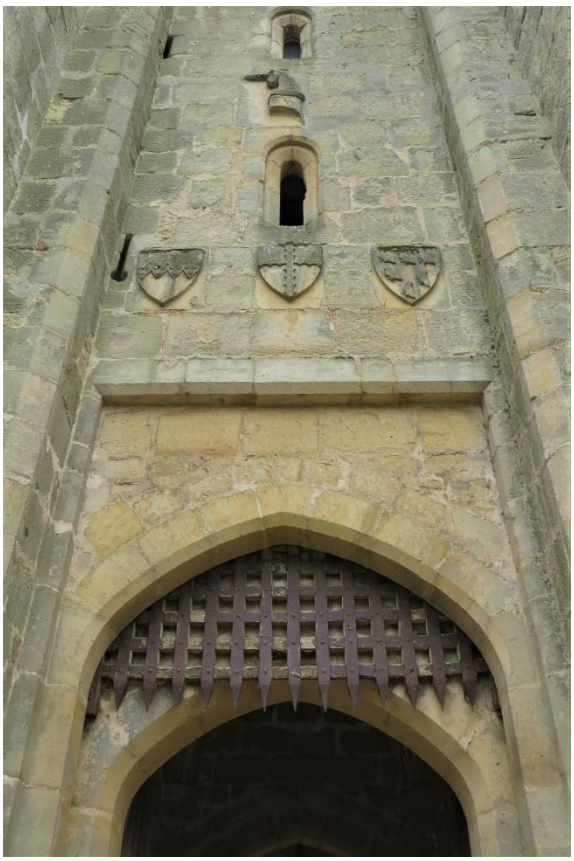
Alan lording it at the top table, above the salt

The chapel stood out for me, due to its large Gothic window, remnants of painted tiles and what looked like a piscina. We could have waited for a tour and would undoubtedly have benefitted from information not found on site boards, the National Trust leaflet and map or subsequent internet searches. We also missed a 'Story of Bodiam' exhibition in a cottage in the grounds and a history of Bodiam video in the north-east tower. I think we peeked inside and didn't realise.

An amusing discovery was that Bodiam Castle was used in the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, in a shot depicting it as 'Swamp Castle' in the 'Tale of Sir Lancelot' sequence. I can remember enjoying that slightly crazy film many years ago, with its daft but strangely endearing knights who say *"Ni"*.

There were decent kitchen buildings, including two large fireplaces that would have been used every day. One included a bread oven, as bread was important in the medieval diet. Rich people had superior white bread, while poor people had inferior brown bread. Times have changed! A well in the south-west tower was complete with water, which would have been the main water supply for the castle, collected in buckets to be used in the kitchens. It wasn't suitable for drinking, so ale was the liquid refreshment of the day, including for children.

It was midday and we needed refreshment ourselves, so we had a last glance around the quadrangle with its chambers on the outer walls and the towers that were so important as lookout posts. Many people were milling around the inner spaces, with some children clambering where they shouldn't. I'd read on an information board how the castle is built of Weald Sandstone that wears easily and it was asking people not to climb on walls or window sills. Window sills? Really?



The oldest dated portcullis in England

As we left through the gatehouse, we looked back at the oldest dated portcullis in England, complete with medieval masons' marks and other historical graffiti. However, I was so distracted by the dizzying sensation of craning my neck to take a photo of a very tall edifice (and also aware of the other people nearby) that I failed even to search for any masons' marks or graffiti. What was I thinking?

Having made our way back across the moat bridge, where some large carp were amassing, we looked for a place to eat our packed lunch. There was an available picnic table a little way from the gatehouse, where we sat and ate our ciabatta rolls. Alan intermittently had to chase away a number of hopeful ducks from the moat, who kept appearing under our table and freaking me out somewhat. Some other people at a nearby table were feeding them, but they still kept waddling across to us. I was beginning to wonder what it is with birds in Kent…

Maybe the ducks had diverted our attention from the nearby 'Story of Bodiam' exhibition that we'd intended to visit, but we found ourselves retracing our steps along the wide gravel path, stopping now and again to take photos of the castle within its attractive moat. Attractive it may have been, even in medieval times, but since it had basically acted as a sewage system for around 30 different privies throughout the castle back in the day, its smell would have been highly off-putting.

Thankfully, we weren't bothered by any rank odours as we sauntered back down to the National Trust shop and bought a jar of jam or two. Our journey back to Little Melrose was straightforward and the rest of the day was spent peacefully. I think we were both content with a gentle visit to yet another castle, although my leg muscles were still a bit fragile after those 56 deep steps up the postern tower.

Sunday 14th July – Day 9

After this morning's first protest from the bellowing ruminant, I noticed as I made my way to the kettle that there was a patch of blue in the sky. This boded well, but as it was the weekend, we decided to eschew the bigger attractions and pay a visit to the lesser known Tonbridge Castle instead.

By the time we left, though, it had begun to drizzle and good fortune was evading us. After a 25-minute drive to Tonbridge town centre, we arrived at the car park to be greeted by a notice declaring that it was closed – and yet there were lots of cars there and people milling around. It seemed there was a special event taking place, as we ascertained after Alan managed to park the car in a nearby street.

It all felt a bit off-putting as we walked towards the castle and it became even more so when we found a small café for the daily cappuccino. We ended up at a small table facing a wall, were eventually brought two takeaway cups (with totally unnecessary plastic lids) and everybody in the main room of the café seemed to know each other. They were not only served their drinks in real cups, but were being offered free cake! Whatever the deal was, we felt like unwelcome outsiders.

The disappointment deepened when we arrived at the castle to find it was also shut – after having earlier checked on the website that it was not only open today, but offering an audio guide. It looked as if an event was happening there too, possibly connected with the other event. Tonbridge was earning itself a big, fat thumbs down. We therefore left forthwith and drove to historic Penshurst Place and Gardens, which was only about 15 minutes away.

Penshurst Place (photo by Alan Santillo)

The origins of the name Penshurst may derive from Stephen de Pencester, who was Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports and owned the manor towards the end of the 13th century. However, the present manor house was completed in 1341 for Sir John de Pulteney, who was a London merchant and Mayor of London four times. He built the 60 feet/18.3 metres high great hall, which has been referred to as the finest remaining example of 14th-century domestic architecture in England. Sir John died in 1349, the year of the Black Death.

Sixty years later, John of Lancaster, 1st Duke of Bedford, owned Penshurst. He had strong royal connections, being the third son of King Henry IV, the brother of King Henry V and acting regent for King Henry VI. During his ownership, he was responsible for creating the second hall, known as the Buckingham Building (so-called after the subsequent owners, the Dukes of Buckingham).

By 1519, Penshurst belonged to Edward Stafford, 3rd Duke of Buckingham, who made the regrettable mistake of holding a lavish banquet costing around £1 million in today's money, for King Henry VIII. Within two years, the paranoid monarch had the duke tried for treason and subsequently beheaded at the Tower of London. The estate then became Crown property and so was owned by the Tudor family.

It remained royal property for 30 years, being used mainly as a hunting lodge. Documents show that Henry VIII appointed Sir Thomas Boleyn, father of Anne Boleyn, as custodian. Henry would stay at Penshurst while courting Anne Boleyn, due to its proximity to Hever Castle, the home of the Boleyn family. How incredibly convenient for Henry and Anne…

In 1552, King Edward VI gave Penshurst to his loyal steward and tutor, Sir William Sidney. William's son Henry married Lady Mary Dudley, whose family were later implicated in the Lady Jane Grey accession controversy, although Henry escaped unscathed. Penshurst stayed in the Sidney family over the centuries, but the building deteriorated. However, despite neglect and the ravages of World War II, later members of the Sidney family restored Penshurst as a historically significant house and garden, continuing to do so to the present time.

The present time found us in a fairly long queue, waiting patiently to purchase entrance tickets at £10 each for the gardens. We hoped we would be suitably impressed for what was basically an impromptu visit – and I'm glad to say we were. Firstly, though, we walked around taking photos of the attractive house under a sky that couldn't make up its mind what to do all day long. The cloud went from thick white, to several shades of grey, with patches of blue sky now and again in between. When the sun was able to reveal itself, it was hot.

The sky was misbehaving

The historic gardens were a delightful surprise, as we walked around the many individual garden 'rooms' separated by tall yew hedges. A lot of the general layout is the same since Tudor times, as the gardens have records dating back as far as the 14th century. The older blended perfectly with the newer, with parterres and topiary alongside beds and borders such as the Jubilee Walk, which was officially opened in 2012 to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.

Many beautiful beds and borders (photo by Alan Santillo)

I liked the styles, colour themes and aspects of the different areas, many of them against the backdrop of the house. The garden as a whole felt cared for and even loved. There was an Italian garden, a rose garden, a paved garden, a nut garden, a blue and yellow border, a long border and many more beds and unexpected areas. I didn't always have much idea of where I was, but I didn't mind at all.

Not long after midday, the clouds had mainly cleared away and it was decidedly hot, so we took ourselves and our picnic sandwiches to the orchard, where we sat in the shade of an obliging apple tree and enjoyed a half hour or so of near solitude. It's always a delight to see old apple and pear trees. For possibly the first time ever, I saw a splendid bunch of mistletoe hanging from an apple tree, both mistletoe and tree looking perfectly happy with the arrangement.

More walking and garden appreciation followed. Sculptures, a trellised walkway and a large pond with a fountain, water lilies and fish added to the variation. In fact, we thought we'd finished and had started back to the car park, when we saw another garden area leading off from the path, partially obscured by greenery.

We were flagging by then, which turned out to be highly appropriate, because after deciding to have a look, we found ourselves in the Union Flag Garden:

The Union Flag Garden

Hundreds of white and red roses, with dark purple/blue lavender created a credible Union Jack, best seen from a raised viewing platform at one end, of which we naturally took advantage. The sky was looking tumultuous in one direction, but serenely blue in another, which added another element to the overall scene. It was a bit touch-and-go taking photos with a number of other people milling around amongst the flag sections, but we seemed to manage quite well.

A customary visit to the well-stocked gift shop finally ended the visit. On the way back, I thought how it would have been better to miss Tonbridge altogether and spend more time seeing the house at Penshurst. I had no idea it was as historically significant as it is, or had such an all-encompassing garden. It was a resounding thumbs up for Penshurst, for having saved the day in a remarkable way.

Monday 15th July – Day 10

Today was our planned trip to the castles at Walmer and Deal, a short way up from Dover on the east coast. The sky was clad in thick white cloud, but we started the day at 07:00 and left Little Melrose with its accompanying grumbling wildebeest at 08:40. The flush noise seems to have a habit of sounding worse on some days than others, it's a surprise each time. Meanwhile, Alan had worked out a route to avoid the motorway, which would take us along some rural roads.

I say roads, but there were many delightfully named lanes with a history only to be wondered about – Bedlam Lane, Rosemary Lane, Lewd Lane, Blackberry Lane and Squids Gate Lane. Of course, there were some fast roads and some of the bendy, bumpy variety, but it wasn't horrifically bad and we arrived safely at Walmer Castle. Interestingly (to me, anyway), we had lived at Walmer for about a month when first moving to Dover in 1975, before finding a house to rent that was much nearer to the ferry port in Dover itself.

Walmer Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

The castle appeared to be remarkably devoid of visitors when we first arrived, but we could immediately tell that it was one of English Heritage's better castles, as there was a proper tearoom. It naturally made sense to go in and enjoy a rather good cappuccino and share a piece of cappuccino cake (just to be consistent).

When we were ready to explore the castle, we discovered to our joy that there was an audio guide that led us from room to room in an easy-to-follow way. It was an excellent audio guide, free with the entry price, which was technically free from our membership with English Heritage anyway. We'd been primed before coming to Kent of the popularity and excellence of Walmer Castle, as opposed to the disappointing emptiness of Deal Castle, so we were basically raring to go.

Walmer Castle was a result of King Henry VIII's famous rejection of Catholicism and the consequential threat of invasion from King Francis I of France and Charles V (the Holy Roman Emperor). Henry ordered an artillery castle to be built at Walmer, which was one of many such fortifications along the coast equipped with guns to sink enemy ships and to fire on troops landing on the nearby beaches.

Completed in 1540, it was part of a 2.7-mile barrier formed by castles at Deal and Sandown. Between these three castles were four earth and timber gun forts. No invasion took place, but a small garrison commanded by a captain continued to guard the coast through the Tudor and Stuart reigns. There were further alerts in the 16th century, including the Spanish Armada attacks, but no direct action.

However, there was some combat at Walmer Castle in 1648. At that time, King Charles I was a prisoner of Parliament, but a rebellion broke out in Kent in favour of the king, whereupon sailors from the English navy captured the castles at Walmer, Deal and Sandown. There was then fierce fighting when a Parliamentary force arrived to re-take the castles. Despite their best efforts, the soldiers at Walmer surrendered, followed by the other two castles.

There were more battles in the late 17th century and beyond, when the Dutch navy clashed with the English navy in a series of conflicts over trade and overseas colonies. During these ferocious sea fights, the Dutch posed a threat to England with their activities around the east and south-east coasts. In 1665-7, extra soldiers were brought in to Walmer Castle to repel a Dutch landing. Local men and boys from Deal also helped to prepare defences by digging up turf and piling it on the ramparts to lessen the impact of incoming cannon shot.

When an attack came, it took place further along the River Medway near Chatham, but from that time until the early 19th century, there was much war and conflict. Walmer Castle continued its strategic military role, with the added benefit of some modernisation, including nine new 18-pounder guns and a new armoury.

Guarding the coast

Becoming a member of the castle's garrison depended on a recommendation from an influential person and all posts were awarded by the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. It has always annoyed me that Cinque Ports is meant to be pronounced 'sink ports' when the pronunciation of the French 'cinq' for five springs most readily to my mind – and even though 'cinque' is Italian for five. On the other hand, 'cinque' is also Norman French, which makes more sense than an Italian origin. Or does it? I may be confusing myself.

It has been suggested that the Cinque Ports may have originated from a chain of coastal forts established by Emperor Constantine I in the early 4th century, designed to defend the southern and eastern coasts of Roman Britain from raids by barbarian tribes of Picts, Saxons and Franks (the Franks being a Germanic tribe that migrated to the fertile lands of Gaul). So much unrest…

Back to the narrative and the five major ports on England's south-east coast were Sandwich, Dover, Hythe, New Romney and Hastings. These ports were in decline by the 16th century, but still held certain rights and privileges until the mid-19th century. Along the way, other towns and villages became considered as limbs of the main towns, forming the Confederation of Cinque Ports – Deal and Walmer are limbs of Sandwich. Nowadays the Cinque Ports is a ceremonial organisation only, complete with an official Lord Warden.

The first Lord Warden was appointed by King Edward I in the 13th century, in order to allow Crown control of the ports. He was also Admiral of the Cinque Ports and from 1267, Constable of Dover Castle. Today it's a sinecure (an office or position with little or no duties) with an honorary title, but clearly with a certain amount of prestige. In fact, when checking out the English Heritage handbook to plan our visit, there'd been a note to say the castle was closed from 12th July to 14th July because the Lord Warden would be in residence.

Since the early 18th century, Walmer Castle has been the official residence of the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, as we discovered when we were talked around so well by the audio guide. At that time, the Lord Warden was Lionel Sackville, whose main residence was Knole, near Sevenoaks in Kent – was he perhaps an ancestor of Vita Sackville-West? Whoever he was, he had improvements made to the captain's apartments and also had an extension built that overlooked the sea, with stylish drawing and dining rooms. The poor captain, though, had to relinquish his rooms for the Lord Warden's personal use.

The improvements extended outside with the construction of new stables and a walled and hedged kitchen garden. The castle was still used for coastal defence, but it had a dual role as a well-equipped residence. Several prime ministers were appointed Lord Warden, including William Pitt the Younger. He started visiting occasionally, although in 1802 he decided to make Walmer Castle his home base and added a lasting contribution by making new pleasure grounds around the castle, framed by extensive woodland.

Another famous Lord Warden from 1829 until 1852 was Arthur Wellesley, known to most as the Duke of Wellington. He was very fond indeed of Walmer Castle and even loaned it to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert for four weeks. He died at the castle in 1852 and by far the most moving part of our tour was to see his bedroom, which had been arranged to look as it had done when he stayed there, with the same furniture and the same chair in which he had passed away.

Although further improvements were made between 1865 and 1891, Walmer Castle was basically a very old building by the early 1900s and unsurprisingly, it was prone to damp. Its fighting days had disappeared by 1860, although the War Office kept the castle for potential wartime use until 1905. Responsibility for the castle then passed to the Office of Works as an ancient monument, who opened it to the public when the Lord Warden was absent.

I was intrigued to learn that the Queen Mother, Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, had been Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports from 1978 to 2002 and was the only woman to hold the office. She loved Walmer Castle and often stayed for a short holiday in the month of July, accompanied by at least one of the royal corgis.

In fact, to mark her 95th birthday in 1995, William Pitt's original walled garden was redesigned for her. The style was decidedly tranquil, with an arched pavilion reflecting in a central and fairly large rectangular lily pond. Lawn, topiary bushes and borders of colourful planting surrounded the peaceful water.

The Queen Mother's Garden (photo by Alan Santillo)

By the time our fascinating audio tour had ended (unfortunately during which no photography had been permitted), we noticed that it was almost midday and people could be seen already heading towards the tearoom. We therefore decided to join them in order to ensure a seat, because we knew that despite Walmer Castle being relatively small, the tearoom is highly-esteemed.

As it was, we found a table easily enough and decided to splash out on an excellent brie and tomato quiche with salad and coleslaw, accompanied by home-made (or castle-made?) lemonade. It was a very enjoyable lunchtime and contributed quite significantly towards a 'proper day out' feeling.

We then spent an hour or so exploring some of the garden areas in the castle grounds. The Broadwalk Garden was particularly pleasing, having been unveiled in 2016 with replanted herbaceous borders. An undulating yew cloud hedge was an eye-catching and unusual backdrop, but even more unusual was suddenly coming across a fox slumbering peacefully amongst the plants.

Wandering further on, there were more beds of very colourful flowers and we could have walked even further, but we were aware of time passing and our forthcoming second castle visit of the day. We therefore headed back to the Kitchen Garden, where fruit and vegetables are grown especially for the tearoom. This kitchen garden has grown produce for the castle for almost 300 years and being close to the castle, it had its own unique backdrop.

Colourful beds

A kitchen garden fit for a castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

We knew that a lot of work had recently been carried out to William Pitt's original pleasure grounds, with areas being restored and reopened to the public after years of being lost to decay and wilderness. There was a new sunken Glen Garden and restored woodland paths, which we would have explored had time allowed.

However, Deal Castle was calling and despite having been forewarned that it was a far different experience to Walmer Castle, it still had historic value, surely?

It was a mere five minutes' drive along the road and after parking in the car park alongside, the first disappointment was to see a large white van parked right in the entrance, taking up most of the space. It was clear that some sort of marquee scaffolding was being dismantled after a previous event, so the usual 'entrance photo' was impossible. However, we remained positive and went to the entrance desk, only to find there was no available audio guide.

We remained polite and began our investigation, firstly outside. Its strategically placed position overlooking the sea was great, although because of its circular design, it also usefully covered all-round defence. It naturally shared a lot of history with Walmer Castle and had guns mounted in five tiers. Prior to its completion, it had received a special visitor when Anne of Cleves landed at Deal in December 1539 and rested at the castle before continuing onward to meet King Henry VIII. The poor soul knew not what was about to befall her!

Inside the grounds of Deal Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

In 1547, the castle was armed with 57 guns, but for the rest of the 16th century, it was maintained on a very low budget. By 1570, it had only 17 guns that were largely unserviceable, thus making all-round defence impossible.

The castle was sadly neglected during the Stuart reigns of King James I and King Charles I, although a small garrison of around 22 men did their best to keep the peace. In 1639, a naval battle between the Dutch and the Spanish took place in sight of Deal Castle. Several Spanish vessels were sunk, with 2,000 shipwrecked soldiers finding their way ashore at Deal and Dover.

As at Walmer Castle, there was trouble at Deal Castle in 1648 when soldiers loyal to King Charles I were under siege from Parliamentarians. Deal held out a while longer after Walmer's surrender in July, but finally surrendered in mid-August.

Also similar to Walmer's situation in the later 17th century, the coastline was often threatened during conflicts between the English navy and the Dutch navy. In 1667, the captain of Deal Castle, Colonel Silius Titus (a name I simply had to mention), prepared for an attack landing. In the end, this attack materialised near Chatham, but at least Colonel Titus was not at all silly, having been well-prepared.

Near the start of the 18th century, Deal castle was modernised, with the installation of 12 modern 9-pounder guns. A captain's house was built, with a large garden just outside the castle, while the old Tudor parapets were demolished and replaced with crenellations. Further alterations resulted in a dual-purpose building that encompassed both a residence and a defensive gun battery.

By 1773, there existed a garrison of only eight gunners, sufficient for only two guns. Extra help from militia and regular soldiers was called in during serious threats, as in 1744-5 and 1779 when French forces were expected. However, by the time of the French wars between 1792 and 1815, Deal Castle was no longer considered a significant defence.

Its symbolic importance nevertheless remained. Deal and Walmer became home to a huge new barracks that was built in 1794-7 for approximately 1,000 men, with the addition of a naval hospital in 1800. Several large expeditions took place from Deal, including an attack on the Netherlands in 1809. Deal was one of five embarkation ports for 40,000 men, although the expedition failed. Thousands of soldiers died from malaria, filling the hospital at Deal to overflowing.

By the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, Deal Castle continued to be the captain's residence, while Deal itself remained a naval and military town. However, after the death of the last salaried captain in 1838, the castle became more of an occasional seaside retreat. Although four 32-pounder guns remained, with a gunpowder magazine in the castle, they were more or less relics.

The War Office transferred the castle to the Office of Works in 1904, for conservation as a historic building. When a German invasion was feared during World War II, the Royal Artillery requisitioned the castle in May 1940, building two emplacements for 6-inch guns and an underground magazine. A concrete observation post was erected and the castle's interior was battery HQ. Other defensive measures were taken, but the threat of invasion had receded by April 1944 and the Home Guard held the fort. Good old Dad's Army!

After the war, the Office of Works resumed care of the castle, planning to restore it as closely as possible to its Tudor form before opening it to the public. From 1951-1974, no captain was appointed, but today the Commandant General of the Royal Marines holds an honorary captaincy, although the castle is no longer a residence. Frankly, I wasn't at all surprised, because as soon as we entered the building, the dankness was palpable and the austere emptiness overwhelming:

Austere emptiness (photo by Alan Santillo)

I must confess that I found the overall air of neglect depressing. While some effort had been made to supply audio explanations in various strategic positions, the few we attempted to listen to seemed reluctant to work at all, so we gave up. To my mind there is nothing like the welcoming feel of a personal audio guide slung around your neck that explains the necessary and the nitty gritty, while often offering some juicy anecdotes to boot.

Talking of boots, the lower rooms or cellars were obviously so wet at times that boots had thoughtfully been provided – although since the weather had remained dry for some considerable time, we had no need. To be honest, I'm not sure we would have availed ourselves anyway, although I expect many children would enjoy the experience. The cellars were actually quite atmospheric and it did occur to me that the contrast between the austere emptiness of Deal and the furnished comfort of Walmer was decidedly illuminating.

Throughout the whole visit, I couldn't help feeling that Deal seemed like a poor relation of Walmer. This seems a great pity, because Deal Castle as a building is extremely intact. Having been to the similarly empty-roomed St Mawes Castle in Cornwall, I could appreciate the benefit of placing lifelike models in situ to bring to life what would have happened in various places.

The chapel (photo by Alan Santillo)

It wasn't all disappointing, though, because there was a lovely little chapel used for special occasions, which must be quite an evocative and special experience. It did highlight to me how other areas of the castle might look much more interesting if they could be paid a lot more attention. That would take money, of course – but I couldn't stop thinking how Deal Castle deserves to be cared for. Imagine a little café area that sold food and drinks overlooking the sea…

Our visit to Walmer and Deal was drawing to a close, as we left the building and saw the large white van still blocking the entrance. There was nothing to be done about it, so we departed slightly disconsolately for Little Melrose. The traffic was heavier on the way back, but all was well and by 16:40, we were enjoying a much-needed mug of tea and a relaxing evening to follow.

Tuesday 16th July – Day 11

Praise be, a blue sky this morning with a sunny forecast! Thanks to the internet, we'd sussed that our planned visit to Canterbury Cathedral would be spoiled by the nave's closure, due to University of Kent graduation ceremonies. There was also scaffolding outside, so it was Plan B, which on this occasion was Battle Abbey.

As we began our 40-minute drive to Battle in East Sussex, I was trying to make clearer a dim memory of having visited Battle and Hastings as a child, whilst on holiday at Brighton. The passing years have erased any details, but I'm sure there was no visit to an abbey, especially one as imposing as befell our eyes on arrival.

It seemed incongruous that such an important ancient monument with its truly massive frontage should have a modern town right up to its doorstep, but life inevitably goes on. We'd arrived a little before the 10:00 opening time, but hung around outside under a really hot sun, until there was movement at the entrance.

Inside the abbey grounds

As usual, our first stop was at the café for a cappuccino – after taking photos before the expected mass of visitors arrived, of course. Even so, we were first at the café. I must confess to having annoying qualms about appearing too desperately eager and often attempt to linger nonchalantly, but Alan has no such inhibitions and always marches straight up to the counter.

It was such a fine morning that we sat at an outdoor table. It felt simply wonderful to be outside underneath a blue sky with coffee and a shared slice of carrot cake at such a significant site, with all its delights about to be discovered.

Adding to this feel-good fest was a free audio guide. It was a very good one too, firstly directing us to the nearby visitor centre and 1066 exhibition. This was excellent, with clear colourful boards describing the rather complex lead-up to the renowned Battle of Hastings. I kept trying to get my head around the fact that it should have been called the Battle of Battle, but that title was apparently considered a potential loss of credibility (or something), so the nearest town of Hastings, about seven miles away, had been selected instead.

There were lots of children looking around the exhibition, which was only to be expected, as it was a perfect place for teaching. I didn't mind, especially since I'd managed to fit in a toilet visit just prior to a sudden influx of clamorous little people, so we headed out comfortably towards the battlefield walk.

This would take us around the area where Harold Godwinson, last crowned Anglo-Saxon king of England, eventually lost the battle to William, Duke of Normandy (or should I say Guillaume?) Whatever his preferred name, he was apparently sometimes called William the Bastard, but after the determining battle, he instead became known as the victorious William the Conqueror.

We chose the full battlefield tour, which was a good decision. Carved wooden sculptures at strategic points illustrated the battle's progress, with excellent descriptions from the audio guide. Even I could have an idea how the battle had unfolded on the landscape, opening with the rallying sound of trumpets.

On 14th October 1066, William's men advanced up the hill to attack the English shield wall, led by armed archers and foot soldiers. Ranks of heavily armoured infantry and cavalry came behind, poised to further the attack. The fighting was ferocious, with fierce battle cries amid the clash of weapons and the groans of the injured and dying. However, with the advantage of the slope and their solid wall of shields, the English resisted every assault.

A Norman archer takes aim…

In order to prevent the Norman army from fleeing in confusion from the English line, Duke William/Guillaume rode out to confront his men, berating them for their cowardice. His appearance had the desired effect and they turned again to attack the English, who had chased them down the hill. Those who had become separated from the safety of the shield wall were surrounded and met a sticky end.

This successful Norman counter-attack brought the first phase of the battle to a close in what was probably early afternoon. The men must have been exhausted, with neither side having gained an advantage, although it's thought the English ranks could well have been reinforced by some late arrivals to the battle.

It seems that William was under increasing pressure to bring the battle to an end, ordering his men forward again for a final assault on the English line – but this time with a trick tactic. At a certain point in the fighting that followed, he ordered his troops to act as if they were retreating. King Harold and his army pursued them, leaving their strong position on the hill and breaking the shield wall. Then to finalise events, King Harold was killed. The English had lost.

After winning the battle, William's army still had to capture and subdue towns in the south-east. William was crowned as king at Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day 1066, but it took another five years, especially in the north, before he was able to establish control over all of England. However, it had been the 1066 battle defeat that had cost the English their best chance of stopping the invasion.

By the time we'd finished the battlefield tour, I realised I'd become fractiously hot and tired, so lunchtime was becoming a necessity. Just at the end of the walk, after a climb up a hill in July-type heat at midday, we spotted a vacant picnic bench and unashamedly veered towards it at the speed of two hungry, hot people. That lunchtime felt like an unexpectedly special experience, sitting there in the shade of a tree with our cheese sandwiches, gazing out at the battlefield of 1066 before us, with the magnificent abbey behind us, awaiting exploration.

In 1070, William had been ordered by Pope Alexander II to found a monastery at the battle site, as both a memorial to the fallen and as an act of atonement for all the bloodshed. The high altar of the abbey church was supposedly sited at the spot where Harold had died, which was a decent gesture if it happened to be true. I really want it to be true. The abbey was dedicated to St Martin of Tours and completed in 1094, housing up to 140 Benedictine monks.

All that aside, we were once again refreshed and eager to recommence our explorations, with the aid of the friendly audio guide and our trusty cameras. I was pleased to see reconstruction drawings of how things probably looked on the information boards, both inside and outside. The information itself was also very enlightening. Below is a view of the dorter, or dormitory, taken from the Old French word 'dortour'. I was intrigued to learn that a reredorter is a latrine at the rear of a dorter, a synonym of which is 'necessarium'.

Dorter of Battle Abbey with latrines and modern-day vapour trails
(photo by Alan Santillo)

During the 13th century, the abbey's financial success had meant the monks were able to replace most of the early buildings with those seen today – those still standing after King Henry VIII's savage Dissolution of the Monasteries, that is. Henry gave the abbey and much of its surrounding land to his friend and master of the horse, Sir Anthony Browne. The church and parts of the cloister were demolished, while the abbot's lodging was adapted for use as a country house, with extensive parkland that contained the southern part of the battlefield.

As happened in numerous estates such as this, there followed many years of gradual decline, mainly due to absentee owners, the sale of land to raise funds and long periods of neglect. However, when the Duke and Duchess of Cleveland owned the property between 1857 and 1901, they modernised the house and built a new library, as well as restoring the grounds.

Since 1922, the abbot's lodging has been leased to the independent Battle Abbey School and in 1976, Battle Abbey was sold to the British government. English Heritage now look after this exceptionally important piece of English history, with a full programme of building conservation and archaeological excavations. I was incredibly glad we'd chosen Battle Abbey, it would have been dreadful to miss it.

The whole tour of the ruins was fascinating, particularly the wonderfully atmospheric 13th-century rib-vaulted ceiling of the Novices' Common Room. It's considered likely that novices were trained there by a master in the Rule of St Benedict, although the room's usage may have changed throughout its long history, possibly becoming the warming house. In such a warming house, a communal fire (probably a coal brazier) would have burned throughout winter – a necessity to prevent chronic chilblains and even frostbite, I should think?

The monks' common room and the novices' common rooms were situated on the ground floor, while the monks' dormitory/dorter was above. I absolutely loved the pillars, arches and high-quality construction in general. The walls would originally have been plastered and limewashed, while the columns of Sussex marble would have been brightly polished. It must have been an awe-inspiring building in which to live, work and pray and such a loss when it was partly demolished.

High-quality masonry in the Novices' Common Room (photo by Alan Santillo)

It had become increasingly hot as we'd walked around the site, although I wasn't complaining (all that much). There were many more visitors than when we'd arrived, but the site was big enough not to feel overly crowded. To be honest though, we did end up standing around in the heat a fair bit, in our quest to wait for the aforementioned visitors to depart from the desired photographic view.

I felt slightly cheated that we were unable to view the refectory and cloisters incorporated in the school. I do love a good cloister, but that's not of the slightest importance compared to doing what's necessary to keep these historical buildings standing, which is usually financially related. There will be other cloisters…

I was sad to see that little remained of the chapter house, an area that was traditionally the focal point of monastic life. For someone with very little visual imagination, I find it quite easy to imagine the monks gathered together to listen to a daily chapter – in this case from The Rule of St Benedict, no doubt. Various business matters would also have been discussed and erring monks would have confessed their wrongdoings and awaited their penance.

As for wrongdoings, I couldn't fail to notice that several dog owners were casually allowing their dogs full rein on extending leads, in an area where many other people were roaming around. We had to be careful ourselves where we were walking and on a busy site, this is an obvious trip hazard. Maybe English Heritage need to specify that extending dog leads are not allowed for health and safety reasons (although they should probably draw the line at penance).

Battle Abbey School, complete with cloisters (photo by Alan Santillo)

Our meanderings took us to the remains of the 11th-century church, which was originally about 226 feet/69 metres long. A stone slab marked the supposed site of Harold's demise, where the high altar would originally have been. The thought that it *could* have been the actual spot was thrilling and chilling in equal measure. At the east end, aisles would have continued around the apse to form a processional way, from which three chapels emanated. Battle Abbey was probably the first English church built to this plan, which was common in the Loire Valley of France, home of the founding Benedictine monks.

In the late 13th century, the east end was replaced by a new choir and five chapels, with a vaulted crypt underneath. Unfortunately, the Dissolution put paid to what must have been a remarkable building, so that we were only able to descend into the remains of the crypt, where the foundations have been excavated. It still felt a privilege to be in the once hallowed space, though – which is why it felt so wrong to see two children jumping around on some of the remaining stonework, while their parent walked past them without a word.

In the crypt with a view of St Mary the Virgin Church

Just opposite was the church of St Mary the Virgin, which had been founded circa 1115 by Abbot Ralph. It was worthy of a visit in its own right, but our energy was waning. There has been so much on this holiday that we could have investigated further if we'd had the stamina. As it was, we climbed out of the crypt (which sounds faintly Gothic) and headed to the walled garden.

This was the garden the Duchess of Cleveland protected from visitors to Battle Abbey when she'd lived in the grounds of the abbey from 1858, during its past life as a country estate. The walls have been conserved and the layout of her garden recreated, with sixteen varieties of apple trees, including Golden Pippin, which originated in Sussex in 1629. Nine varieties of pear, cherry, quince and medlar have also been planted, as well as native grasses and wildflowers. To complete the ecosystem, Victorian-style beehives have been installed, complete with bees.

There was also an ice house and a dairy, built between 1810 and 1820, but it was approaching 14:00 and the heat of the sun was seriously taking its toll. We did visit the exhibition inside the abbey gatehouse, which was fairly cool and spacious and showed some interesting exhibits. Excavations at Battle Abbey have yielded personal objects, ceramics, stone fragments, glass and tiling.

Finally, a look around the gift shop that contained some diverse but delightful items was a pleasing end to our visit, proving very helpful in sorting out souvenir dilemmas for our grandchildren. We then hit the road again and drove back to Little Melrose for some reviving tea and biscuits, not to mention a reacquaintance with the poor agitated bison in our current necessarium!

Wednesday 17th July – Day 12

We awoke to a sunny morning, although the familiar white cloud was still hanging around. Our original plan had been Rochester for its castle and cathedral, but the call of the wild (to be precise, trees and a garden) was uppermost and we settled on yet another Plan B. This was the National Trust's Sheffield Park Garden, with its own car park and café … but mostly peace, tranquillity and a whole lot of trees.

It was an hour's drive to East Sussex, first visited in 1983. I must have been impressed back then, as I wrote in a letter: "They must be the most beautiful gardens we've ever seen, everyone agreed. The trees were quite majestic and the whole setting amongst small lakes and bridges was almost magical. If only we lived closer, the atmosphere was so tranquil and soothing."

Praise indeed – but I made no mention then of any intriguingly named lanes we may have passed. Today I noted Churn Lane, Tong Lane, Longends Lane, Spotted Cow Lane and Hogs Hole Lane. I love these lane names, particularly the last two.

After arrival, we headed to the café for our daily cappuccino fix. This was accompanied by an enormous piece of Victorian Sandwich, which we very sensibly shared. Soon afterwards, we were happily walking along various paths amid superb specimens of unusual trees. The weather was decidedly warm, even a little humid, so we were glad of the dappled shade. We stopped frequently, both to admire our surroundings and to feel the healing qualities of the trees.

Tree healing in abundance

Sheffield Park, first mentioned in the Domesday Book, was later owned by Thomas Howard, 3rd Duke of Norfolk, who entertained King Henry VIII at the country house in August 1538. Henry made full use of all his subjects' real estate and hospitality!

The house is still privately owned, having first been owned by the West family. By 1700, the deer park had been improved by avenues of trees and the laying of lawns. The house was rebuilt in the Gothic style and Capability Brown landscaped the gardens. He created woodland walks with clearings to give views of two lakes and planted oaks to break up the landscape without obscuring the views.

Later landscaping added two lakes, with more planting and trees specially selected for their autumn colour. In 1876, a cricket pitch was laid out by the 3rd Earl of Sheffield, used in 1884 for the first cricket match between England and Australia. The Australians won… By 1885, an arboretum consisting of both native and exotic trees was being established and further work included the building of the Grand Cascade and a bridge linking Capability Brown's original two lakes. One can only imagine the amount of work involved in such an extensive scale.

In 1910, the estate was purchased by Arthur Gilstrap Soames, a passionate plantsman who continued with the large-scale planting. During World War II, however, Sheffield Park became headquarters for many troops, with Nissen huts sprouting up in the woods and garden – it must have been a much-liked base.

In 1953, the estate was necessarily split up and sold in lots. The Grade 1 listed house was converted into apartments, while the National Trust managed to purchase around 40 hectares of the estate in 1954. This has happily now increased to almost 80 hectares, with some further additions.

Our visit had just missed the fabled Waterlily Festival, which had run from 8th June to 14th July. I have to confess that this situation we minded not at all, as presumably there would have been many more visitors. As it happened, the waterlilies were still abundant in differing colours of white, cream, yellow and various shades of pink, all adding to the inspiring scenery. Being lakes, of course, meant ducks and feathers, but they weren't too flappily bothersome.

We walked and walked, admiring the trees and the idyllic scenery until just after midday, when we returned to the already crowded café for a cheese sandwich and a lemonade. The latter was very refreshing and cured my slight headache.

We then walked some more, finding ourselves at one point on a pontoon, at the lower end of Middle Lake. It felt unusual to stand on a platform prone to swaying when other people moved on or off, without any control. The view was somehow more immersive, but thankfully not involving any actual contact with water.

An abundance of waterlilies (photo by Alan Santillo)

We then walked in a different direction and became slightly lost, but it was peaceful amongst the trees – true tree therapy. After a while, we came across the place where World War II had once disturbed the calm. In 1939, the War Office had requisitioned Sheffield Park, drafting in troops to build two large camps. The Nissen huts were first occupied by British soldiers, but Canadian troops arrived in 1941, causing quite an impact on the estate and surrounding area.

At the time, the house was owned by the widow of Arthur Soames, who allowed dances to be held there, during which the soldiers were able to socialise with local people. The latter were no doubt perfectly happy with the arrangement. It's totally irrelevant, but the name Soames still reminds me of *The Forsyte Saga*…

The training that took place in the grounds meant hundreds of used bullets were found after the war, as well as other bits and pieces. Another literally concrete reminder of the past was a path we walked along that had been laid by the soldiers. We also noticed brick and concrete bases of the Nissen huts that had been laid out randomly underneath the tree canopies, thus being hidden from the sight of enemy planes. They were used as dormitories, washrooms, workshops, mess rooms and storage huts, to cater for all the needs of the troops.

Although the impact on the landscape meant it took many years for the garden to be restored to its former glory, there was a heart-warming memorial stone with a plaque that read: "In grateful memory of Canadian forces stationed at Sheffield Park during the Second World War, who went from here to fight for peace and freedom." I was glad they had been thanked, it felt very important. Sadly, the freedom they fought for has failed to bring peace?

An interesting snippet I came across while writing this up, was how Sir Winston Churchill thought it was likely that he might be bombed at Chartwell, his family home. He therefore decided to move his much-loved pair of black swans to Sheffield Park, an estate owned by his son's father-in-law. According to local legend, the Canadian soldiers who had woodsmen and hunters amongst them, shot and killed the unfortunate swans. However, replacements were found!

A shadow of the magnificence to come

Our visit was coming to an end, as we stood on a bridge and took one last reflective look at a beautiful scene of lake and trees. I knew that on a clear day in autumn, the green and silvery scene before us would be completely outshone by the vibrant colours of leaves turning red, pink, yellow and orange, as levels of chlorophyll declined. My own words of 1983 echoed in my mind: "If only we lived closer…"

That sentiment remained relevant as we drove back to Little Melrose at the mercy of the Sat Nav, which took us through Tunbridge Wells and a mess of hold-ups, road works, diversions and traffic lights. Driving in most places now is so much worse than it used to be, with too much traffic and too many risk-taking drivers.

Nevertheless, we made it back safely and were soon enjoying a life-saving mug of tea. I'm so British. As I reacquainted myself with the beleaguered water buffalo, I began thinking of the packing. It's hard to believe tomorrow is our last day.

Thursday 18th July – Day 13

Yesterday's weather forecast was right and we awoke to rain. As it was our last day, though, we determined to make the most of it and decided on a return visit to Chartwell, the country home of Sir Winston Churchill. The first visit had been in 1982/3, when it appeared my memory hadn't been working to full capacity.

All I could actually remember was standing outside on the terrace, admiring the red brick building with its unusual façade, with our young daughter Rachel in a pushchair. Our son Daniel bent down to her (for some reason lost in the mists of time) and she grabbed both his ears, as feeling ears was her favourite way of self-soothing. Daniel, however, wasn't particularly amused.

We weren't particularly amused at the way the rain worsened as we drove for 45-minutes or so to Chartwell, but it was fine rain and not at all cold. We arrived just after 10:00 when the café opened, so indulged in a cappuccino only, as we were both feeling somewhat "caked-out." At the ticket office, we were given a timed ticket for the house at 11:00, when it opened. We therefore had about 20 minutes to walk around the grounds in fine rain that kept stopping and starting.

Chartwell in fine rain (photo by Alan Santillo)

Five minutes before the house opened, Alan put up his umbrella for the first time on this holiday. Apart from walking around to find our bearings while we were waiting, we also spent a while waiting for a people-free view of the house itself.

Local records suggest a property had been on the site in the later 14th century, while the name Chartwell probably derives from the chart (Kentish for common) well on the site that still feeds the ponds to the north of the house. However, the current house was built during Tudor times, as wood analysis dates it from 1515-1546. It was most likely built as a hunting lodge and it's thought that King Henry VIII stayed there while courting Anne Boleyn at nearby Hever Castle.

In the late 1700s, the property became known as Well Street and was used as part of the London Foundling Hospital, until it was sold to the Drinkwater Bethune family in 1836. The next owners were the Campbell Colquhoun family, who renamed the house Chartwell and made many alterations and improvements to the house and land. Some families have impressive names.

Chartwell was then purchased by Winston Churchill himself in 1922, having been advertised as an imposing mansion. The ivy-festooned, red-brick villa standing on a hill was also said to embody the least attractive aspects of Victorian architecture, whereupon Churchill set about employing a young architect called Philip Tilden, who proceeded to transform the house into the attractive building it is today.

For two years, he added larger windows and added more rooms, whilst keeping the more aesthetically pleasing period features, such as stepped gables. The end result was thought to be a modest and comfortable home, but Chartwell's position so close to the Channel made it vulnerable during World War II. During that time, the Churchill family therefore lived mostly in Oxfordshire and later at Chequers, the official country house of the UK prime minister.

The time came to enter the house and I can say with all honesty that I really enjoyed the self-guided tour. As well as plenty of information panels, there were real-life human guides in the rooms who were happy to oblige with answering questions, but I was ever so slightly vexed to discover that from November, audio guides are to be supplied free with the admission price. Gulp. Never mind…

It felt as if the whole house was a fitting memorial to the life of Winston Churchill, who played such an important part in 20th-century history. I do have one slight question mark, though, as to why he and Nancy Astor appeared to rub each other up the wrong way? There are many accounts of sarcastic put-downs between the pair, who were both in Parliament. Was Winston against female MPs, or did they both secretly enjoy their witty verbal clashes?

Regardless of Winston's true feelings towards the lady who once approved of my father's strawberries, his presence was almost tangible in the significant amount of memorabilia from his life that was on public display. I found it truly fascinating.

In particular, his study evoked the strongest impression, with the old Tudor roof timbers and personal items arranged tidily upon his desk. Apparently, Churchill spent a great deal of time in this room after his retirement, sleeping in a four-poster bed in the corner, so that he could return to work when he woke.

Churchill's study with Tudor origins (photo by Alan Santillo)

As well as the rooms being full of his life's mementos, the walls were lined with photos of the famous people he'd met during his time as prime minister and beyond. When the National Trust presented Chartwell to the public for the first time in 1966, it was sensitively displayed as it had been in the 1930s, when Winston, his wife Clementine and their four children were in residence.

The National Trust worked closely with Lady Clementine Churchill, Lady Soames (Winston and Clementine's youngest daughter) and Grace Hamblin (Winston's former secretary) to prepare the house for its public début, with the latter becoming the first administrator for the house when it opened to the public. The National Trust still has a good relationship with the Churchill family, which must help towards the current cared-for atmosphere of the house and grounds.

The dining room particularly stood out, looking elegant, modern, bright and green:

The bright and airy dining room (photo by Alan Santillo)

It had a low ceiling and five graceful arched windows in a neo-classical style, which let in a lot of light and offered wonderful views of the Kent countryside. There was simple rush matting on the floor, chairs covered with green chintz and green curtains. It would have been in this stylish room that Churchill entertained his guests, probably with numerous heated discussions.

On the top floor of the house was a museum filled with even more items gathered during the life of this extraordinary man, who had been in an extraordinary position in extraordinary times. We spent rather a long time reading about a wide array of exhibits, including medals, uniforms, photos, books and gifts from many international leaders. Churchill was clearly a well-respected man.

The rain was still indecisive as we walked through some colourful planting and up to the café again, as it was lunchtime. Winston's favourite food had been Moroccan and the café seemed to pride itself on offering several Moroccan dishes. This was appreciated by Alan, but not by me, the English food philistine. Alan had a vegetable tagine with cous cous, and I had a cheese sandwich. I know…

There were more gardens to view after lunch, so we went wandering. We stopped at Winston's studio, where many of his paintings were on view. Churchill's love of painting was an important part of his life and saw him through periodic bouts of depression. In the 1930s, he converted a cottage on his property into an art studio and during his lifetime, completed up to 500 paintings.

His studio is kept as he'd left it, with the easel and palette in situ. However, there was a talk taking place when we ventured inside and it was packed with people, so we had a minor look around wherever we could and returned to the still not-raining open air. Over 100 of Churchill's Impressionist paintings are hung on the walls of Chartwell and I'm pleased to say that I'd noticed and admired several.

Churchill's handsome brick wall

Leading from the studio to the garden was a handsome brick wall, built mostly by Winston between the years 1925 and 1932. We stopped to admire the wall and the planting in front of it, as the sun struggled to maintain a brief appearance.

The walled garden itself had provided a near self-sufficient supply of produce for the family, with stock often being sent to Churchill's London home. Nowadays it's still a working kitchen garden, supplying the café. I found it to be a bright and beautifully maintained garden that was a pleasure to walk around, so that I didn't particularly care about the gathering dark clouds. Maybe Churchill wished he could feel like that when World War II was approaching?

Dark clouds gathering beyond the garden

I'd been interested to learn that Churchill's financial situation was sometimes unstable and he'd almost been forced to sell Chartwell in 1938. The upkeep of the estate became too expensive and in 1946, some of his wealthy friends purchased Chartwell for the National Trust at a cost of £50,000. Their one condition was that Winston and Clementine could live there until they died.

As it happened, Churchill left Chartwell in October 1964 in poor health, moving to his London flat in Hyde Park Gate. After his 90th birthday on 30th November, he died a few weeks later on 24th January 1965. By decree of Queen Elizabeth II, his body lay in state at Westminster Hall for three days, while more than 300,000 mourners filed past his casket, hewn from English oaks taken from Chartwell. I remember seeing his funeral on television, with cannon salutes, fighter jets and a procession of hundreds of military personnel. The queen herself attended.

There is no doubt that Churchill was an iconic figure in British history and Chartwell had been his much-loved family home since 1922. Lady Churchill decided to live in London and left Chartwell in June 1965. The National Trust wanted to open the house and gardens as soon as possible, which was achieved in the summer of 1966. I was very glad we'd re-visited. The whole house and garden in its extended landscape felt very peaceful and had made an enjoyable day.

So that was it, the final visit of our Kent experience, although we did call in at the shop and bought ourselves a compact and healthy white salvia, as a memento of both Chartwell and the whole holiday. The drive back to Little Melrose for the last time was no trouble, but the necessary packing was as tedious as ever. I confess I was quite glad that we'd soon be saying goodbye to the in-house bovine groaner.

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The journey back to Cornwall the next day was as hideous as the journey up. As I look back over that intensely historical sojourn in Kent, I'm so gratefully happy that we made it. A little over two weeks later, Alan had a heart attack and the rest of the summer was filled with other concerns. I know for a certainty that we'll both always remember Kent, with a variety of happy memories.