STOKESAY CASTLE

Near Craven Arms, Ludlow, Shropshire SY7 9AH

23rd May 2024

Although technically a fortified manor house, Stokesay Castle has many features of a castle. It has seen action and is basically brilliant, so I have no misgivings about including it in a collection of castles. It stands proudly in its uniqueness near the Welsh border on slightly rising ground in the basin of the River Onny, complete with an audio guide, a nearby tearoom and a church included in its history.

Although the sky was overcast and it was quite windy on the day we visited, it wasn't raining, which in view of previous days was a definite bonus. Having walked from the cosy tearoom towards the manor after a welcome cappuccino, our first view of Stokesay Castle certainly looked like a manor and a castle. The parish church of St John the Baptist, built around 1150 as a chapel for the Stokesay settlement, had been badly damaged in the civil war, after which it was largely rebuilt. For now, though, our interest was Stokesay Castle itself.

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

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

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

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

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

Laurence set about having a first-rate home built there soon afterwards. It had very probably neared completion when he obtained a licence to crenellate his acquisition. This could have been due to its position near the Welsh border, because although King Edward I (reign 1272-1307) had made a conquest of Wales in 1284, an uneasy peace existed when the house was being built. Pockets of unrest and active bands of thieves necessitated a demonstration of power.

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

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

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

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

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

Entrance through the gatehouse (photo by Alan Santillo)

Carpenter marks

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

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

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

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

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

The pale red floral mural

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

Unusual tiles

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

North tower's level one chamber with tiles and fireplace

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

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

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

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

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

The fabulous gatehouse from inside the grounds

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

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

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

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

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

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

The solar (photo by Alan Santillo)

English Heritage depiction (photo by Alan Santillo)

The overmantel was quite bizarre, divided by pilasters shaped as human figures – slightly rude human figures if I may say so – with two grotesque heads in their midst. It may have been ornately carved from a Flemish design, complete with fruit and flowers to soften the strangeness. There are traces of the five colours it was originally painted with, although it was too high up to scrutinise closely.

The strange overmantel

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

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

Right next to the solar block was the aforementioned south tower, an impressive addition if ever there was one and to my mind the grandest and most handsome looking part of the castle. It's thought likely that Laurence of Ludlow had it built as he became richer and more powerful, as a place from where he could direct his ever-expanding business and also receive people who wanted to borrow money.

It therefore had a dual purpose, being a demonstration of his growing status and also to provide a modicum of protection. Although it had no drawbridge, it was undoubtedly a secure residence, and despite its original timbers being destroyed by the 1830 fire, the floors are thought to be where they originally were.

The handsome south tower exterior

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

Inside the south tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

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

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

Wall slits in the battlements

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

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

Further repairs were needed in 1902, carried out by John Allcroft's heir, Herbert, plus some help from the Society for the Prevention of Ancient Buildings. The castle was officially opened to visitors in 1908, with the revenue reinvested into the property, but despite a significant number of visitors, financial difficulties were prevailing by the 1930s. Eventually in 1986, it was agreed to put Stokesay Castle into the guardianship of English Heritage, who became its owners in 1992.

A four-year sensitive restoration followed, with a policy of preserving the building the way it had been passed to English Heritage, therefore minimising physical intervention as far as possible. To my mind, this was exceptionally successful, so that the site we visited today is sound and astonishingly authentic. The clear and informative audio guide also enhanced our experience a great deal.

As we left and walked back in the direction of the tearoom, we passed by the castle's exterior with a more informed appreciation of the entire site, particularly the moat. Although no evidence exists that it was filled with water in the 13th century, it would still have been an intimidating obstacle to potential raiders when the curtain walls would have been standing at their full height.

Part of the surrounding moat (photo by Alan Santillo)

Not only had the castle visit been thoroughly enjoyed, but so was the brie and cranberry toastie we had in the tearoom. Reluctant to leave, we went to look at the church that had been built in around 1150 as a chapel to the castle.

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

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

It never ceases to amaze me what historical gems are to be found where you least expect them and Stokesay Castle was one of them. Not only has it been described by historian Henry Summerson as "one of the best-preserved medieval fortified manor houses in England", but it also has its own folklore. Legend suggests that Stokesay had once been the home of two giants, who lived nearby. They stored their treasure in Stokesay Castle, but on losing the key, they both died of grief. I can't say I was anywhere near dying of grief to leave Stokesay, but there was a definite, if small, reluctance. It's well worth a visit!

Bye...