

WEDDINGTON CASTLE - An Online History

Other Halls and Castles Around Nuneaton - Astley Castle

DEATH OF A CASTLE

((Article transcribed from Nuneaton Evening Tribune "Midweek Mag", Wednesday April 16, 1986, p9))

Eight years ago this month, Astley Castle – one of North Warwickshire's most historic buildings – was ravaged by fire.

It was a tragedy that reduced the 12th Century home to the virtual ruin it is today.

A picture of Astley Castle in its prime was among a cache of old photographs turned up at Cawthorne's Printers in Nuneaton. Surrounded by meticulously-kept flowerbeds and lawns, ivy clinging to its ageing walls, the castle looked every inch a stately home in the 1930s.

Owned by the Arbury Estate, it housed a hotel and a restaurant in the early 70s and became a popular night spot. But the castle's fortunes took a disastrous turn for the worse in the spring of 1978. Within months of the hotel closing down, flames swept through the ancient rafters, causing thousands of pounds of damage.



Tribune journalist Gef White – now our Chief Reporter – and photographer Les Fannon were at the scene to record the tragedy. The Evening Tribune of April 4, 1978, read: "Flames ripped through the heart of Astley Castle last night, when 50 firemen fought for 1½ hours to bring the fire under control."

“Crews from Nuneaton, Bedworth, Atherstone and Leamington joined forces to save the former 12th Century castle from total devastation.”

“Fire crews were still in attendance today after the all-night operation had succeeded in rescuing some parts of the building from collapse.

“But the fire left untold damage. Early estimates of the damage today ran into £100,000.

“Fire Chief, Divisional Officer Bert Webley, said the alarm was raised by a 999 call at 9.57 last night.

“But when we arrived the fire was already going and flames were leaping from windows,” he said.

“At the centre of the blaze was the former restaurant area, but fire cut through two upper windows and parts of the floor collapsed.”

Fortunately no one had been in the building. The hotel had closed the previous year, leaving the building unused for several months. The cause of the fire was uncertain, despite on-going investigations.

Tribune photographer Les Fannon, struggling through flame-damaged rooms to take his shots, made a bizarre discovery on the night.

MAGIC

In a top floor room were “Black Magic” type effigies, stabbed with nails in the style of a death ritual. Gef White wrote at the time: “The mystery is intriguing investigators of the blaze.

A room was exposed by the fire and detectives were shown a circle of black lace, horror masks and three ‘death ritual’ dolls, stabbed by nails coated in red paint.

“The room, tucked away in a top corner of the castle, contained three dolls. The faces of each were painted in a tragic grimace and nails pierced their hearts and legs.

“On the door of the room was a hand-painted symbol like a huge question mark.”

VICAR



Astley vicar, the Rev Colin Henderson, who was also vicar of Coton, said he knew nothing of Black Magic rites in the parish.

“I am inclined to be cynical about such practices, personally, although I know people can be harmed by dabbling in these things,” he said.

Police were later told that the bizarre effigies had been left out after a Hallowe'en party – some four months before – was held at the castle.

Astley Castle was the home of the ill-fated Lady Jane Grey, who was executed in 1554 after a brief reign as Queen. It was owned by her father, the Duke of Suffolk and dates from the 12th and 15th centuries. Much of the present building was erected around 1620. The castle was also one of the local landmarks to find its way into George Eliot's writings. It appeared in her “Mr Gilfil's Love Story” in the guise of Knebley Abbey.