

WEDDINGTON CASTLE - An Online History

Other Halls and Castles Around Nuneaton - Astley Castle

THE LANDMARK TRUST: Future Landmarks

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Introducing Astley Castle

The complex site that has developed at Astley over some thousand years of continuous occupation is of national importance - the castle is listed Grade II* and its setting is a Scheduled Ancient Monument - but today it stands crumbling, locked away and unexplained.

There is the moated 'Castle' itself, more a fortified manor house than a true castle, with successive building phases. Nearby stands the church of St Mary, first built by Sir Thomas Astley in 1343 and enlarged by the Chamberlains in the early 17th century. The 18th century Gothic stable block, reminds us that Astley lies on the estate of Arbury Hall, itself a famous example of eighteenth-century Gothic architecture.

Astley Castle was occupied until 1978, when it was devastated by fire. Today, it is an unconsolidated ruin, so ravaged by time and events that no single element of its architecture is a truly exceptional example of its kind, especially in its current state of advanced decline.

Yet even today, it is impossible to walk around the site without sensing its atmosphere. Moated castle, gateway and curtain walls, lake, church and the ghost of pleasure gardens all combine in a picturesque landscape of great power. By giving the castle site a new purpose that allows it to take its place in the 21st century and beyond, the Landmark Trust hopes to gently bring back to life the entire setting at Astley, to be enjoyed through staying, and to be explained and made accessible to all.

Astley Castle: Owned by three Queens of England

The grand sweep of events that Astley Castle and its inhabitants witnessed, and just occasionally moulded, makes it a mirror for our national history.

First it was the medieval seat of the Astley family. After the death of Simon de Montfort at the Battle of Evesham in 1266, it passed to the Greys, an ancient family who became dramatically involved with the line of royal succession.

In the mid-fifteenth century, beautiful Elizabeth Woodville lived at Astley Castle as the wife of Sir John Grey, who died fighting for the Lancastrians in 1461 in the Wars of the

Roses. As a young widow, she caught the eye of Edward, Duke of York, from 1461 Edward IV. They married secretly in 1464, in defiance of the arranged royal marriages of the day. Elizabeth bore him the ill-fated Edward V and his brother Richard, the Princes in the Tower who were presumed murdered to clear Richard III's route to the throne.

Astley Castle was next owned by Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville's eldest daughter, known as Elizabeth of York (though still a Grey by descent). She became Henry VII's queen in 1486, conveniently uniting the Yorkist and new Tudor dynasties.

A granddaughter of Elizabeth of York (and so niece of Henry VIII) was Frances Brandon, who married another Grey, Henry, later Duke of Suffolk, to whom Astley Castle passed. When Henry VIII's young son Edward VI died in 1553, Frances found herself third in line to the throne after Henry's daughters Mary and Elizabeth, whom he had specifically excluded from the line of succession. Lord and Lady Suffolk, an ambitious couple, decided to thrust their reluctant but devoutly Protestant sixteen-year-old daughter, Lady Jane Grey, forward for the throne. Lady Jane was proclaimed queen and ruled in name only for nine days in July 1553 before Mary Tudor's faction prevailed. Lady Jane was beheaded for treason on Tower Hill in February 1554 with her young husband.

After further rebellion, her father Lord Grey was captured in a hollow oak tree at Astley after betrayal by a servant called Underwood, who had been bringing him food. Grey was executed eleven days after his daughter. Frances, the Dowager Duchess, survived to marry Adrian Stokes, a retainer. The fortified parts of Astley Castle were slighted as a result of their treason, but Frances retained ownership.

In 1600, the castle was bought by an enthusiastic new owner, Sir Edward Chamberlain. The Chamberlains rebuilt much of the church and restored the castle, being mostly responsible for its fine south front. During the Civil War, a Parliamentary garrison took up residence in the castle from 1644 until thrown out by the Royalists in 1646.

From this time forward there is a sense that, while always inhabited, the castle began the steady decline that has resulted in its plight today. In 1674 it was bought by the Newdigates who owned the neighbouring Arbury Estate. The castle was never again a significant main residence, but always half-forgotten and something of a problem.

Astley Castle and George Eliot

George Eliot (christened Mary Ann Evans) is one of our greatest novelists. She was the daughter of the land agent to the Arbury Estate and used Astley and its church (and no doubt its inhabitants) as inspiration for Knebley Church and Knebley Abbey in *Scenes from a Clerical Life*.

George Eliot's writings provide some of the most vivid descriptions of rural life in nineteenth-century Britain.

Giving Astley Castle a future

With such nationally significant associations, it is unthinkable that Astley Castle should be allowed to disappear.

Landmark has already tried to save Astley Castle. In the 1990s, numerous schemes were drawn up that tried to conserve and convert the whole remaining structure. It was with great regret that in 2001 Landmark realised that the funding for such a complete restoration would not be forthcoming and so had to withdraw.

However, we did not forget about Astley's magical and very important site. In 2005, as part of Landmark's 40th anniversary celebrations, our thoughts turned again to the conundrum that is Astley Castle. 2007's initiative is the result of the work done since. The castle itself has continued to deteriorate. It is clear to everyone who looks at it that unless action is taken very soon, there will be nothing left to save.

Learning from its earlier involvement, Landmark has decided to explore an entirely new approach, accepting that some of the fabric of the castle has now passed beyond repair.

Architectural competition

At the end of 2006, 12 different architectural practices were invited to submit designs for a new 21st century Landmark that had to sit within the footprint of the existing building. All 12 architects took up the challenge and we were delighted to receive a very wide range of solutions. The brief required that the most important parts of the surviving fabric were to be retained but those parts that were either of lesser importance, or simply too decayed to retain, would be dismantled and removed.

We believe that the winning scheme, Witherford Watson Mann (WWM) does just this, retaining Astley's history whilst allowing the site to generate an income for its future maintenance. WWM deliberately follow a 'middle way' in their interventions – adopting neither conservative repair in a traditional manner, nor conscientiously modern structures. Instead they strive to allow old and new to work together to achieve a harmonious whole.

Winning entry

The winning entry by architects Witherford Watson & Mann proposes two storey accommodation in the oldest part of the Castle. A large, light living room with kitchen, dining and sitting areas will be created on the upper floor with the best views south to St Mary's Church and west across the historic parkland. On the ground floor, the scheme allows for four bedrooms and two bathrooms, together with a generous entrance hall with an open fire that can also serve as an additional sitting area. Two of the bedrooms are cleverly placed between the existing west wall of the Castle and the outer curtain wall where it best survives, allowing the old windows in the curtain wall to be reused. The

stairs occupy the position of the old 'vice' tower (by now largely collapsed), and a simple lift will be incorporated to ensure everyone can enjoy the upper floor.

The front part of the Castle will be partially roofed to create an 'outer court'. WWM have devised their scheme with a well known firm of structural engineers, Price & Myers, and it both protects all the wall heads from the weather and uses finely made concrete beams to tie the front and back walls together, essential to ensure their long term survival. It would have been too expensive to bring this section back into habitable use and so the walls will only be gently repaired creating the impression on approaching the front elevation that Astley might still be only a ruin. But 'hidden' inside is an elegant, comfortable, modern house that gives new life to the Castle and is just the latest phase in over 800 years of changes and alterations.

So this winning scheme retains as much of the most important historic fabric as possible whilst still allowing visitors to occupy the Castle rather than merely look at it. There will be wonderful views of St Mary's Church and the Gothic Coach House from the south facing glass fronted wall and balcony of the upstairs living area. It is hoped that low key repairs will also be carried out to the Coach House and sheds behind it as part of the overall project.

This modern building would be intended as a Landmark for the future, available to stay in and so allowing the site to generate income to help with its maintenance. The new structure would help consolidate some of the most important and earliest parts of the castle. Other parts are now so far decayed that there is no option but to reduce them to a mere footprint. However, the bulk of the surviving walls would remain and the overall history of the site be made known to the wider public through regular Open Days and through an interpretation trail around the wider setting.

There is of course an enormous challenge ahead to raise the funding for this ambitious project. Helpful and encouraging discussions have been held with English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund and North Warwickshire Borough Council, as well as the Arbury Estate. A project of this scale is very unlikely to be feasible without support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, and in December 2007 we submitted an application for £1.47 million to the HLF. If all goes well, it is hoped that an initial phase of clearance and repairs could begin in 2008.

Astley Castle is a site of national importance that deserves to survive for centuries more. Its state of dereliction makes this an ambitious project, and we need your help and support to make it possible. We also welcome your comments, so please let us know your reactions to our proposals by clicking on the links below.