

History... on our doorstep

Take the Glinton Road towards Helpston, before you get to the level crossing, turn left at the sign for Marholm – over the manned level crossing and about 1/4 of a mile down the road on your left, you will find Woodcroft Castle. If you're lucky, the gate will be open and you can take a peek at this magnificent (now very private) residence...



This photograph of Woodcroft Castle was taken prior to the current owners taking residence

WITH its walls of smooth Barnack stone and bold circular corner tower, Woodcroft Castle appears to have followed the same plan as Edward I's mighty Harlech Castle built in the 1280s, though on a much more modest scale.

The original inspiration for this type of stronghold was the Roman town, with their central courtyard, surrounded by four corner towers.

The reigning monarch of the time and his Queen – Eleanor of Castille also owned neighbouring Torpel Castle. This was linked by Torpel Way – a route which links Peterborough and Stamford (via Helpston, Ashton, Barnack and Bainton) and remains a well-used walkway to this day.

Today, there are no traces of the three other corner towers, but the moat continues around the square plot, transformed at the back into a garden with box-edged beds. To the south, a slender bridge leads across the moat, and to the east, a garden gate opens onto a path which allows you to walk round the outside of the tower.

It is possible that the castle was never finished – or that the ranges at the back were made of timber and have long since disappeared. There is no evidence of a drawbridge or portcullis and Woodcroft therefore poses the question, long disputed by historians, whether such castles were meaningful defences, or built simply for show. Backing the latter theory is the fact that there are no openings in the castle walls for the discharge of missiles and that the 2' deep moat would hardly deter the enemy!

However, in recent years, the discovery of an outer wall suggests that the castle was a larger stronghold than previously thought.

Tracing the history of the castle is hampered, partly because historically the castle sat within the 'Soke of Peterborough', a kind of Andorra among the English counties, which Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, in his county



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series of journals, included first in the Northamptonshire volume and then transferred to Bedfordshire and Huntingdon – today the castle is firmly in Cambridgeshire!

The Manor of Woodcroft was held by the Woodcroft family from the 12th century to at least the 14th century for the fee of 'half a Knight' from the Abbot of Peterborough. The Preston family are listed as sub-tenants from about 1300.

The property was purchased in 1545, from a gold merchant, by Lord Fitzwilliam of Milton and remained in the Fitzwilliam family for nearly 450 years until it was sold in 1988.

For a decade from 1642, England was wracked by civil wars. Eventually Charles I was beheaded and Oliver Cromwell was named Lord Protector. During this period, Woodgate Castle was the home of Dr. Michael Hudson, the trusted Chaplain to the King. During the Civil War, he and his fellow Royalists fought dauntlessly against the Parliamentary forces, but were gradually forced to retreat to the 'safety' of Woodcroft Castle – whereupon, they were besieged.

Promised 'safe passage', they eventually surrendered only to find the promise broken, the Roundheads resumed their assault once they were let into the Castle. Hudson was chased up onto the battlements and forced over the edge, where he clung desperately by his fingertips, until his attackers chopped off his fingers and sent him plummeting into the moat. Still alive, he attempted to scramble out, but was struck by several musket butts. *The Shell Guide* quotes, from an unknown source: "His tongue was cut out by a low bred shopkeeper from Stamford and sent round the country as a trophy."

According to history and oft repeated on the Peterborough Ghost Walks Tour (organised by Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery), his screams are still heard echoing from the battlements at night, his anguished and agonised voice crying 'Mercy, mercy', often accompanied by the sounds of swords, as the long-dead participants repeat their phantom siege over-and-over again.

A century and a half later, the castle appears in the autobiography of local poet John Clare: "I was sent to drive plough at Woodcroft Castle of Oliver Cromwell memory... the place was a very good one for living." The date was 1805 and his employer was Mrs Bellairs.

In 1906, the reference

book 'A History of Northamptonshire' lists the castle as being 'in the occupation of Mr William Renford.'

It is also reported that Daniel Defoe was a distinguished visitor who stayed at the castle while writing one of his travel journals. His father was employed as a farmer, just up the road, at Etton.

Woodcroft Castle also achieved some notoriety in 1926 when it featured in a silent horror movie of the same name – as a haunted castle.

When the house was advertised for sale in the Times Newspaper in October 2003 (FDP Savills at Stamford were the appointed agents), it was put on the market with an asking price of £1.5 million and described as; 'A rare Grade 2 listed medieval castle.'

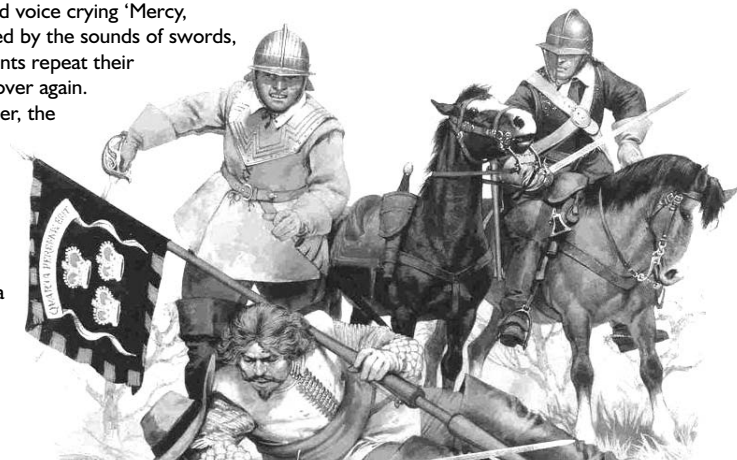
The sales brochure described the property thus: 'Inside, the castle has a friendly bohemian air, and as it faces west, many of the rooms are filled with the afternoon sun. The main front facade looks much as it would have done in Jacobean Times.'

The top storey of the existing building is a Victorian addition. Early in the 20th Century further additions were made at the rear of the castle.

The stone flagged hall is apparently formed out of the masonry from the entrance arch that once led through to the courtyard.

The sellers at that time – the O'Donoghue's were known for keeping ducks in the moat and having swans, peacocks and, at one time, even a couple llamas roaming the grounds – which extend to around 14½ acres, including a small lake and an outdoor swimming pool.

The property sale included the castle's coaching house, sited on the Etton to Marholm Road and in view from the main entrance of the castle. The coaching house is currently the working offices of Bettles Property Sales and Management.



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