

Caludon Castle

Blink and you could miss them, but the city of Coventry was once encircled by a ring of castles and great moated houses. In most cases there is precious little to see on the ground today. Baginton Castle, Biggin Hall and Ernesford Grange are now little more than archaeological footnotes, their grand designs left far behind them. Another of the group – Caludon Castle – was also down in the small-print of the city's history, albeit with the distinct advantage that you can actually see it above the ground.

However, a new book – expertly researched and beautifully illustrated – has lifted Caludon from its erstwhile obscurity, and given it a new lease of life. *A History of Caludon Castle*, Century Public Relations, Coventry, £24.95, is the brainchild of John Clarke, a local businessman and a former chairman of Coventry City Football Club. The research and writing was undertaken by George Demidowicz, former city archaeologist, and Stephen Johnson.

For John, a former pupil of Caludon Castle School, this is the culmination of a lifetime's fascination with one of the least known of Coventry's architectural treasures.

What makes the book especially useful – for me, at least – is that it includes copies of many of the key documents in the castle's history.

Even without this formidable team to promote it, a location that links Lady Godiva, Thomas Malory, William Shakespeare and John Dowland would merit a decent book in any circumstances.

The one link we can dismiss is the one regularly made to Caludon as the birthplace of St George, a bizarre connection the authors are quick to confine to the dustbin. It is one of many myths to fall in the course of this meticulously argued book.

What remains of Caludon Castle stands in park-land a little to the east of the city centre, and close to the Ansty Road. It was one of the more enlightened decisions of Coventry city council to preserve and landscape the ruins after the war, though much of the castle's surrounding estate was made over to municipal housing.

What one can see of Caludon today is a single sandstone wall, some 30 feet in height, and pierced by two Gothic windows; they hint at the elaborate tracery which once filled them. Fortunately, enough archaeology and historical research has gone into turning that wall into an impressive complex of buildings, meriting its Grade I listing.

Despite the unprepossessing state of its remains, Clarke's book demonstrates that Caludon Castle has a rich – one might almost say romantic – history behind it. To call the place a castle is, in itself, a little misleading, since it was rarely intended or equipped to repel an enemy. Fortified manor would be a better term, and even this was a misnomer by Elizabethan times, when Caludon was in its glory days.

Prior to the Norman Conquest, the land upon which Caludon stands was in the possession of Lady Godiva. But with a change of management at the top, the Earls of Chester took over. The estate was gifted to the Seagraves, and then, by descent, to the Mowbrays.

By then Caludon had grown from a relatively humble hunting-lodge to a fortified manor-house, complete with moat, fish-ponds, deer-park, and farm. It was from this seat at Caludon that Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, rode out one September

morning in 1398 to fight with Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford, on Gosford Green.

That colourful and useless spectacle is the starting-point for Shakespeare's Richard II, a scene that perfectly demonstrates both the vain bravado of the two men and the ineptitude of their king. Mowbray is exiled as a direct result, and died at Venice the following year.

The death of Thomas Mowbray ushered in a troublesome century at Caludon. Possession of the estate and house bounced between the Crown and the Norfolks, and, as law and order broke down in the Wars of the Roses, the lands were pillaged and despoiled. One such unruly looter was none other than Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, author of *Morte d'Arthur*. At least his regular spells in prison gave him time to write.

How Caludon must have longed for a period of stability in those lawless years. That fond wish was granted when ownership descended upon the Berkeleys in the 1490s. And it was not just lucky for Caludon, it was good fortune for historians too, for the Berkeleys kept exceptionally good records, today preserved in the principal family seat down in Gloucestershire.

This new history makes full use of those family papers in reconstructing life at Caludon in the later years of the 16th Century, when Henry Berkeley and his family feasted and entertained to their heart's content. Among those enlisted to provide the accompaniment was "John Dowland and his consort". England's foremost lutanist received an eye-watering forty shillings (£2) for his pains.

It is commonly believed that the Civil War delivered the fatal coup-de-grace to Caludon as an aristocratic residence, another myth which this book helps to dispel. That war which spelt the end for many ancient castles (and to Coventry's own city walls) largely passed Caludon by. The truth is a less dramatic one of confiscated land, neglect and divided tenancies that helped to turn the grand house of the Mowbrays and Berkeleys into little more than a farm, albeit one with an impressive pedigree. This book is a case-study in what can be done with expert research, backed by sufficient funding. That ruined wall in a park will never look quite the same again.