

Astley Castle

When you think of castles in Warwickshire, the list usually stretches to just two. So mighty are the fortresses at Kenilworth and Warwick that they tend to block out the light from any others.

Yet the north of the county boasts more than its fair share of fortified places at Tamworth (right on the border, I know), Hartshill and Maxstoke, and a fair number of others that have gentrified themselves beyond their castellated origins. There's a new kid on the block too. Astley Castle - to the west of Nuneaton - has recently undergone a striking renovation by the Landmark Trust, one which has won it a 2013 award from RIBA.

The Landmark Trust, if you haven't come across it, is an architectural charity, which specializes in turning unusual historical buildings into self-catering properties.

What this means is that you can now stay at Astley Castle - and what an experience that would be - but can only visit it on the rare occasions it is not already occupied. We went one weekend at the end of June; the next open days are in September.

Let's break the habit of a lifetime here, and start our history backwards. In 2000 the Landmark Trust took out a 99-year lease on the ruins of Astley, and launched a competition for an imaginative scheme to bring the place back to life. The prize was won by the architectural firm of Witherford Watson Mann, and renovation took a total of five years (and £2.5 million) to complete.

What the firm elected to do was not disguise the fact that the castle was a ruin, but to make its ruined state part of the overall design. Hand-made bricks are stitched into the gaps, or they are filled with glass. It's like a piece of architectural dentistry.

The south side of the castle has become an unroofed, al fresco dining area (weather permitting), and the former hall is now the upstairs living-room and kitchen. Anyone staying at Astley Castle will see only too clearly the decay, as well as the reconstruction.

None of this looked at all likely in 1978, when a disastrous fire ripped through the building. By this time Astley had become a hotel, but the lease had expired, and there was no one to prevent the theft and vandalism that followed the fire. Even the Landmark Trust needed some persuasion that the project was viable.

The 1978 fire brought an end to a thousand years of occupation. As the name implies, Astley is Anglo-Saxon in origin (probably meaning "clearing in the east"), and they provided the site with its earliest occupants. They did not have access to the dish-washer now installed.

The oldest parts of the present building, however, date from the Middle Ages,

by which time motte-and-bailey style living were old hat. By the 15th Century Astley was spacious and sophisticated, with formal gardens, fish-ponds and a lake (but still no dish-washer). The uneven ground around the castle exterior hints at the archaeology still to be uncovered in that regard.

Of all its many owners, two families dominate the history of Astley Castle. The earlier of the two took its name from the manor itself. The de Astley clan navigated their castle through to 1420, when the absence of a male heir handed the place to the husband of Joan Astley, one Reynold, Lord Grey of Ruthin.

Astley fell on its feet, for the Greys were set to become one of the most important families in England, albeit with a larger stronghold at Bradgate in Leicestershire, which tended to be their preferred home.

For those contemplating a weekend's occupation of Astley today, it is the castle's association with no less than three queens that provides part of the attraction. Short of talking oneself into bed and breakfast at Buckingham Palace, there's not many houses which can offer this.

Sir John Grey died fighting for the Yorkists at the Battle of St Albans in 1461, but his widow, Elizabeth Woodville, was not to remain single for long. Three years she married none other than Edward IV. The match caused eyebrows to be raised in court, but the marriage thrived and produced three notable offspring.

The couple's ill-fated sons were to be the Princes in the Tower, mysteriously despatched by person or persons unknown. Their sister - another Elizabeth - also married a king, this time Henry VII, and Astley Castle thus had its second royal connection.

The third queen - though only for nine days - was Lady Jane Grey, born over at Bradgate, the daughter of Henry Grey and Frances Brandon. But the machinations to place Jane on the throne of England in July 1553 cost both father and daughter their heads. And with that the Greys' brush with the highest in the land was over. Bradgate was confiscated, though Astley remained the dowager home of Sir Henry's grieving widow.

There were other owners, of course, but none with quite the exalted status of the Greys.

Such is the tale of grandeur and decay, of ennoblement and debasement, that Astley Castle tells, and the scheme by Witherford Watson Mann sensitively conveys those highs and lows. It was a romantic tale not lost on the novelist, George Eliot, who was raised on the neighbouring Arbury Estate, and is believed to have used Astley Castle as the model for Knebley Abbey in her *Scenes from Clerical Life*.

Astley's new lease of life will hopefully be much calmer. And it has a roof and a dish-washer, which is more than can be said for poor old Bradgate.