

Stafford Castle

We all know how easy it is to lose something - a set of keys, perhaps, or a contact lens, or the TV remote. But to lose a medieval castle is of another order entirely. It can hardly have slipped down the side of the sofa, can it ?

Nevertheless, the county town of Staffordshire did exactly that.

When I was growing up in Wolverhampton, a visit to Stafford Castle was hardly on anyone's itinerary. For one thing, most of it was fenced off and the rest was choked with trees. For another, it was just a ruined Victorian folly, wasn't it ?

Not only was it a folly, it was an expensive folly at that. As late as 1974 Stafford Borough Council debated whether to knock the whole thing down "for safety reasons and in order to circumvent constant expenditure on the fabric of the building..." The decision was narrowly overturned. Instead, the members decided to make the best of a bad job by clearing the trees, floodlighting the ruins and planning a "castle trail". At least you could call the old place "an amenity".

It only took a bit of proper research, and an awful lot of archaeology since then, to demonstrate that Stafford Castle was considerably more important than that. An enormous historical cock-up was avoided by a hair's breadth.

The error is just about understandable. Parts of the castle were indeed from the 19th Century. In 1813 the then owner, Edward Jerningham, commissioned a local stonemason to build a new keep on the hill. The Jerninghams, it has to be said, were more interested in regaining the old baronetcy of Stafford than they were in castle itself. But it would help their claim if they demonstrated local credibility; they probably had little intention of staying there for long.

Half-way through the project, however, the death of Edward and escalating costs led to the abandonment of the scheme. Only two of the four towers were built, and in 1822 the family decamped to one of their other properties.

It was pointless, many thought, looking for a medieval castle on the site, since the records stated that the former castle had been taken down, by order of Parliament, in 1643. An illustration in Robert Plot's *Natural History of Staffordshire*, however, dated 1686, shows distinct ruins of the castle on the Stafford skyline, long after its supposed demolition. They resemble nothing so much as a piece of inept dental extraction.

When the Jerninghams set to work in 1813, then, they had the remains of a medieval castle to start from. And what we can see there today is a medieval cake with Georgian Gothick icing.

What, then, do we know about this very old, and now rediscovered, castle ? That takes us back to Stafford's troubled history in the 11th Century, when not one, but two castles were established in the town. Resistance to the Norman Conquest was strong here, and centred upon Edwin, Earl of Mercia. Once King William arrived to

sweep away rebellion, Edwin's lands were stripped from him and locally awarded to Robert of Tosny, one of the King's Norman lieutenants.

A royal castle was therefore erected to control the centre of the town, while Robert built himself another, a couple of miles to the south-west. This must have been by about 1080. Such castles rarely stood in isolation; there was also a chapel - St Nicholas - within its walls, gardens, a hunting park, and a village - variously called Monetvile or Castle Church - below it.

That first Norman castle - a typical motte and bailey - must certainly have been of wood. Only in 1348 did the family, who now called themselves the Staffords, construct a stone keep, with "towers, halls, chambers, chapel, garderobes, spiral staircases, windows, doors and gates". Given a more than useful start, the Staffords were now making their own way in life. In 1351 Ralph became the first Earl of Stafford, and less than a century later, his great-grandson was made Duke of Buckingham, with family seats at Penshurst and Maxstoke as well as at Stafford.

Such a choice of houses did not always benefit individual estates. When the lord chose to live in one, he lavished attention on it, and that was the case with Stafford Castle in the middle of the 16th Century. When the lord elected to live elsewhere, decline set in.

By the 1630s, with largely absentee landlords, the castle was said to be "somewhat ruined". It took little effort to subdue it in the Civil War, after which Parliament pronounced the death sentence.

From that point on, Stafford Castle was little more than a status symbol for its owners, no longer a viable home. In 1783 William Jerningham had the whole area landscaped, surrounded by trees and turned into a public park. In a moment of romantic bravado he had the ruins raised to ten feet high - to be visible from afar - and painted them white. The castle was being rewritten as a picturesque ruin, detached from its earlier history.

And that, pretty well, is what you can see from the M6 today. It needs a visit - to the castle museum and to the impressive earthworks and fortifications that once ringed the site - to uncover the true history of Stafford's ancient castle. A strange case of here today, and gone yesterday.