

Historic Environment Group Report by Celia Chapple

Concealed by trees, the formidable Brancepeth Castle looms over you as you approach. Five miles west of Durham, nineteen group members came to learn its history.

Our guide adequately summed up this settlement's history: 'Its history is largely the people', and we learned that its owners tossed it around through the centuries like a basketball; this has determined, in places, its current condition. The earliest recorded settlement is a property owned by the Anglo-Saxon Bulmer family of Yorkshire. The rear angular medieval towers illustrate this period. Fortunately, they married into the Nevilles who owned it until C16th. With its three defence towers in front, a moat and bridge, and its strategic position, it fell into the 'distant' hands of the Crown and loyal patriots after the Neville's participation in The Rising of the North (a movement to depose Queen Elizabeth I).

Very little care and upkeep was done until the Russell coalmining magnets took ownership in 1820s. The Edinburgh architect, John Paterson, rebuilt and heightened two turret tops to prevent sinking, and followed interior Regency styling to blend in and bring continuity. The Army requisitioned it during WWII as a Regimental HQ. The property went into private hands in 1960s and the daughter and husband of that owner were our guides.

The owners were very generous with their detailed information as we had an external and internal walk around. The rooms are mostly plain now with some attempt to reconstruct vaulted ceilings, but it's really like painting the Forth Bridge..... There is an 1870s attractive Gothic style chapel with an ornate altar backdrop and is still used for services. The castle's neighbour, St Brandon's Church, is airy and fresh, having been restored after a devastating fire in 1998.

There are many stories I could tell you, from the daughter with unrequited love to Bobby Shafto, murder, an attempted development of coal pit houses, and the pillaging of a thousand trees. About a third of the castle is inhabited today. It is very much alive in the community, utilised for weddings, craft shows and retreats. Before we left, we frequented their small café, run by the owner's German daughter-in-law, who knows how to cook a good soup and brownies! **Next trip: Tuesday 19 August to Marrick Priory. Please contact Tim Meacham for details.**



