

A Short History of Bamburgh Castle.

Most guide books and some history books will tell you that the story of Bamburgh began in the year AD 547—more of that presently. Try to imagine the sixth century. This is not easy, as this was a dark, dangerous and violent time. Remember that the Romans left this country a couple of hundred years previously, leaving the native Britons to defend themselves. Already, at this time, enemies from abroad were struggling to gain power in the South Eastern part of the country. These barbarians came from north Germany and Denmark. They were called Saxons and Angles, and, if you are English, whether you like it or not, they were most likely your ancestors. However, if you are of Celtic decendancy, the chances are that you are not of the blood of the Saxons. Celts occupied most of the West Country and all of Wales, which was a thorn in the side of the Anglo-Saxon.

King Ida, 'The Flamebearer'

Finally, in the year AD 547, King Ida, or to give him his full title, "The Flamebearer," landed his expeditionary force at Flamborough Head and conquered Northumberland. At this time, Northumberland stretched from the Humber to The Firth of Forth. This was a large kingdom and the capital was Bamburgh. King Ida's grandson, Ethelfrith, gave the settlement to his wife, Bebban, and it was then named Bebbanburgh, in her honour, ending up with the name it bears today.

In the sixth century Bamburgh Castle looked nothing at all as it appears today. That ancient, revered historian The Reverend Bede first described Bamburgh as being fortified by a hedge and then by a timber palisade. It was not until the Norman Conquest that the castle as we now know it began to take shape. The Normans were the finest builders of fortifications in the Western world and they made a formidable castle at Bamburgh, which stood until the end of the Wars of the Roses. Until that time, the castle had been besieged on numerous occasions, but was never taken. The invention of cannon spelt disaster for all castles, and, for the most part, they were either abandoned or left to fall into disrepair. This is what happened to Bamburgh.

The Forster Family

Until the Wars of the Roses (1453—1486) the castle and lands adjacent had been the property of the Crown. During the latter part of the reign of Elizabeth 1st she decided to give the castle and lands to the Forster family—in particular one Claudius Forster. This worthy gentleman had been a Warden of the Middle March for quite a number of years and, for services rendered, was presented with this not inconsiderable reward. To explain 'Marches' one must try to visualise the Scottish Border country. There are three ways into and out of Scotland. They are by way of the East, West and Middle Marches. Riever country! They were lawless bands of cattle thieves and thieves of anything else for that matter. With Claudius they had almost met their match. He was as much of a rogue or maybe more so than the rieviers on either side of the border. Now Claudius was firmly seated in what was left of Bamburgh Castle namely the Keep with walls between 9 and 12 feet thick. He lived until he was 101 years old (which would have made him about 12 years old at the time of Flodden!) He sired 11 sons and 2 daughters. None of them could match their father, in any respect.

One of the most famous, or infamous, depending on your viewpoint, must be Tom Forster. It was he and a handful of his followers who took part in the first Jacobite rebellion in 1715. Tom was a trifle short of cash at the time, and, with a view to the main chance, joined the side of the Jacobites. The rebels, thinking they had recruited a man of some substance, promptly promoted him to General. Tom was delighted and rode off to battle to face the soldiers of the King.

Arriving at the battlefield he cast his eyes upon the opposition and promptly surrendered. He was transported to Newgate prison and locked up.

Back at Bamburgh Castle was Tom's sister, Dorothy. A gem! Having heard of the predicament that Tom had placed himself, she and her maid set off, on horseback, to visit her brother. She visited him on several occasions, but on the final visit she saw him in his cell, alone and not with her maid who had accompanied her on the previous times. Dorothy wore her maid's clothes under her own, and, at the right time, dressed Tom in the maid's clothes. The guards by this time had changed and were quite accustomed to seeing two ladies leaving the cell containing General Tom, little knowing that the General was now a lady's maid! All three rode back to Bamburgh Castle where Dorothy hid Tom for two years. He eventually escaped to France by taking a ship from the mouth of the Waren bum, close to Bamburgh. Portraits of the brother and sister still hang in the castle, along with a dress worn by Dorothy along with a pair of her tiny shoes.

Lord Crewe

The Forster family was now bankrupt, and in the middle of the eighteenth century sold the castle and lands. Lord Crewe, Bishop of Durham, ably assisted by Doctor Sharp, purchased the property. This worthy gentleman built a windmill at the north end of the castle, which ground corn, and this was distributed to the poor. Amongst other good deeds was his setting up of a schoolroom in the castle educating young girls for domestic service. He also set up a system of signals between the Castle and Holy Island for the protection of seafarers on this particularly hazardous stretch of coast. On stormy days men on horseback patrolled the beach. A lot of money could be made from salvage! There are still reminders of this at the castle in the shape of massive iron chains, each link of which weighs about 100 pounds. These chains were wrapped around a beached ship and then pulled up onto the hard, out of harms way. Teams of Shire horses carried out this heavy work.

Lord Armstrong

After the end of the regime of Lord Crewe, the castle was bought and splendidly restored by the 1st Lord Armstrong at the latter part of the 19th Century. The cost of the restoration at this time was a staggering one million pounds. The castle remains in the ownership of the Armstrong family.

Archaeology

In the early 1970s, an archaeological excavation was carried out at the north end of the castle grounds. A Dr. Hope-Taylor oversaw this. At this 'dig' he made what he described as "the most important discovery of my career". It was accurately estimated at the scene of the dig that to remove and sift through one foot of soil was to go back 200 years. On this dig and their journey back through time, they came across many interesting finds, but none more important nor significant than a tiny piece of beautifully worked gold. It was about the size of a thumbnail and it dated back to the early seventh century, pre-dating the Lindisfarne Gospels by 100 years. It was shaped like an intertwining beast and was affectionately named 'The Bamburgh Beast'. The monks on Lindisfarne must have seen and examined this article of beauty, and, in all probability, copied it into some of the beautiful illuminations portrayed in their Gospels. The dig carried on to a depth of eight feet, spanning a period of 1,600 years and still they found signs of human habitation - fish bones, carbonised cereals of grain, etc. Therefore it has been proved conclusively that Bamburgh was a settlement long before the arrival of the Anglo Saxons and probably before the Romans. More recently—in fact—in 1998, a team from Durham University explored the interior of the Castle grounds with ultra-sonic scanning equipment. This sophisticated mechanism could detect man-made structures many metres under the ground. What they discovered was evidence of fortifications pre-dating the Roman Conquest.