

Kimbolton Castle, Katharine of Aragon and the headmaster's study...



The Pelligrini staircase

The 22nd October 2021 was a historic day as it marked the first Arts Society outing since the Covid pandemic broke out. It was also the first day of the Autumn half-term holiday, so we had the Castle and grounds to ourselves.

On the two occasions when the Castle opens to the public, queues form outside the Headmaster's study, not to register complaints or check on a child's progress, but to visit the main room in which Katharine was held prisoner until her death. Sadly, nothing remains of Katharine's sojourn because Kimbolton was altered substantially in the Great Rebuilding under the direction of Charles Montague, the fourth Earl and subsequently first Duke of Manchester between 1707 and 1720. The famous architects John Vanbrugh and Nicholas Hawksmoor transformed the building in the fashionable neo-classical style, turning the old Long Gallery into a suite of handsome, light and well-proportioned reception rooms. Robert Adam created the gatehouse through which school traffic and visitors now enter. Originally it was built to screen the Castle from the high street, providing a brewery on one side of the entry gate and a laundry on the other.

Our tour started in the saloon which makes an impressive statement about prestige and taste. Huge portraits of monarchs and members of the Montagu family adorn the walls; highly decorated pilasters add grandeur and the painted ceiling bears witness to the family's cultural interests in art, music and poetry. Charles Montagu, having served as an ambassador in Paris and Venice, was a patron of the arts: he invited Handel to London and commissioned the Venetian painter, Pelligrini, to create a backdrop to a fine wooden staircase behind the saloon to the upper floor. This allegorical mural celebrates the accession of William and Mary to the throne by depicting the crowd of supporters cheering the crowning of Julius Caesar in Rome.

The rooms of the Castle are built around a central courtyard which despite being mostly hidden by walls, can be glimpsed through a central opening from the west lawn. It has a wonderful sweeping staircase up to the White Hall, the original Castle hall. The courtyard was a popular place for outdoor theatrical productions when the Castle became a school.

On the east side of the building there is a very grand portico with another impressive flight of steps by which past visitors would enter. From the portico steps there is a magnificent vista of lawns flanked by an avenue of Wellingtonia, further testimony if it were needed, of the family's past wealth and status.

The adjective is significant. The family fortunes diminished gradually in the nineteenth century and dramatically in the twentieth. Death duties were the final blow and the family left the country to live abroad. When the Headmaster of Kimbolton Grammar School petitioned the government to buy the house by compulsory purchase, he was not opposed. The family were happy to be rid of it. The school benefits from spacious grounds and a feast of neo-classical architecture. Visitors such as ourselves can enjoy the eighteenth century splendour because the family could never again afford any home improvements.

We were grateful that the Custodian of the Castle, Mr. Andrew Bamford, was able to conduct our most enjoyable tour. We were lucky to have golden autumn sunshine to warm us outside and make the interiors glow.