

The Landmark Trust

ASTLEY CASTLE – SUMMARY OF HISTORY

Strictly speaking a fortified manor more than a castle, the site at Astley Castle has been in continuous occupation since the Saxon period. Listed Grade II* , the castle is counted of national significance. Its site includes the moated castle, gateway and curtain walls, lake, church and the ghost of pleasure gardens in a picturesque landscape.

By the early 12th century it was held by Philip de Estlega [Astley] from the Earl of Warwick. Philip's grandson Thomas de Estleye was killed at the battle of Evesham fighting with Simon de Montfort in 1265. The castle was crenellated and moated in 1266, when it briefly changed hands before reverting to the Astleys. In 1338, Sir Thomas Astley founded a chantry in the adjacent parish church to pray for the family's souls. In 1343, Thomas converted this to a college of priests dedicated to the same purpose and funded an extensive rebuilding programme of which only the chancel survives. By 1420, the manor had passed through marriage to the Grey family, through whom it became entangled with the succession to the throne of England and earned its association with three queens of England.

The first, Elizabeth Woodville, probably lived at Astley in the mid-15th century as Sir John Grey's wife. Grey died fighting for the Lancastrians at the Battle of St Albans in 1461 during the Wars of the Roses. As a young widow, Elizabeth caught the eye of Edward IV, the Yorkist claimant to the throne. She became his queen and bore him the ill-fated young princes who later died in the Tower. The second Astley queen was the daughter of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville, known as Elizabeth of York, who became wife of Henry VII.

It was under the Greys in the late 15th century that the castle achieved its most mature and considered form, both as a building and within its setting, which was enclosed at this time. However, after the death of Edward VI in July 1553, the family overreached itself. Despite the better claims of both Princesses Mary and Elizabeth to succeed to the throne, Henry Grey, Duke of Suffolk seized the initiative and placed his daughter, Lady Jane Grey, on the throne. Jane's reign lasted just nine days, before Mary I's superior claims prevailed. Both Jane and later her father were beheaded for treason – Lord Grey rebelled a second time in January 1554 and was captured in a hollow oak tree at Astley.

In 1600, the castle was bought by Sir Edward Chamberlain. They restored the church, which had fallen in to disrepair after the English Reformation broke with Rome in the 1530s and 40s and forbade the praying for souls. Chamberlain improved and extended the castle. During the Civil War, Astley became a garrison for Parliamentary soldiers. In 1674 Astley Castle was bought by the Newdigate family who owned the neighbouring Arbury Estate. From this time on, the castle became a subsidiary dwelling. In the 1770s, an Astley from a cadet branch, Sir John Astley, leased the castle briefly and was responsible for the construction of the stables and coach house, in consultation with his landlord, Sir Roger Newdigate 5th Bart, who was transforming Arbury Hall into the Gothick masterpiece we see today.

In the 19th century, Astley Castle became a dower house and was then let to a succession of tenants. It also inspired writer George Eliot, born Mary Ann Evans, who grew up on the Arbury Estate where her father was an agent. Astley is said to be the model for 'Knebley' in Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857). Eliot drew inspiration for several of her characters from those she grew up with.

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW
Charity registered in England & Wales 243312 and Scotland SC039205

Bookings 01628 825925 Office 01628 825920 Facsimile 01628 825417 Website www.landmarktrust.org.uk

Requisitioned during World War II for convalescing service men, a dilapidated Astley Castle was restored by the Tunnickliffes in the 1950s as a hotel. The castle completed its slide from grace when it was gutted by a mysterious fire in 1978, just days after its lease had expired. Vandalism, unauthorised stripping out and collapse made its plight still worse. The site is so large and so complex that for many years, no solution could be found to give it a future.

Astley Castle became a ruin. As a structure, it had become so ravaged by time and events that no single element of its architecture could be felt to be a truly exceptional example of its kind. By 2007, English Heritage had listed it as one of the sixteen most endangered sites in Britain and a solution was urgently needed.

REPAIR & RESCUE OF ASTLEY CASTLE

In the late 1990s, the Landmark Trust had tried to provide the site with a viable future through its usual solution of conventional restoration and conversion for holidays, but the site is so complex that such an approach proved impractical, both technically (there were no internal finishes or fixtures left to restore) and financially. In 2005, Landmark proposed a more radical solution: to reinstate occupancy of Astley Castle in a manner appropriate for the 21st century. An architectural competition was held, the brief accepting that some parts of the castle were now beyond restoration, but which sought to create good modern accommodation within the ancient ruins. The winning scheme by architects Witherford Watson Mann keeps the sense of living within the castle, making the most the views both into and out of the site.

After careful recording, those parts of the building beyond pragmatic repair were taken down. The new-build introduced also consolidates and ties together what could be saved of the original fabric as unobtrusively as possible, leaving the castle's form in the landscape largely unchanged. There was further work on the wider setting, including repairs to the curtain walls and moat, the 18th-century Gothick stable block. The historic parkland surrounding the moated site, much of which is a Scheduled Monument, has been opened up with public trails.

Thanks to an HLF-funded Access & Involvement Programme, many people learnt about and helped with the restoration project. The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers was active in site clearance and landscaping and numerous schools visited. Astley Art Club were 'artists in residence.' Another competition was held to create a new knot garden, replacing a feature that had existed on the site in some form since the late 17th century with one that echoes Astley 'Three Queens.' Astley Castle finally faces its future with confidence again, thanks too to all who will stay in it, so contributing towards its future maintenance.

When the rescue of the site was completed in 2012, the building received several awards, and in 2013 it received the ultimate accolade, when it was awarded the Royal Institute of British Architects' Stirling Prize for Architecture as 'the building that has made the greatest contribution to the evolution of architecture over the past year.'

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Astley Castle sleeps up to 6 people. Anyone can book this building or any other Landmark property for a holiday; please visit our website www.landmarktrust.org.uk