

Hemyock Castle – A Brief History

At first sight, it can be hard to imagine Hemyock Castle in its medieval heyday. Over the years, part of the moat has been filled in to form a farmyard, buildings have been remodelled and only fragments of the castle defences remain. We hope this tour and the exhibits help you to appreciate how it once would have looked and its importance to this area. There is more information on our website and in our new guidebook.

You are welcome to take photos, without flash or tripod, for non-commercial use. Please do not climb on or sit on or damage the walls. Please take special care of children.

Once possibly a Roman stronghold or Romano-British farm, but there has not yet been a proper excavation. During the 1100s the Norman *Hidon* family built a fortified manor house. The *Dynhams* (originally from Brittany) later married into the family. Initially a defensive tower, with a protective wooden palisade and possibly a ditch or moat; a ‘great hall’ and supporting outbuildings were added later, probably creating a ‘court.’ These earlier structures may well have defined the shape of the later 1380 castle’s moat and walls.

On 5th November 1380, King Richard II gave permission to Sir William and Lady Margaret Asthorpe (née Dynham) to *crenellate their fortified manor house*.

The castle plan is typical of late medieval castles: A roughly rectangular site with tall round corner towers and central interval towers, connected by a high curtain wall; all topped with crenellations. Buildings were of *chert*, local flint stone.

Two towers at the front, about 40 feet (13 m) high, protected the entrance gatehouse housing the portcullis and the drawbridge over the moat. The curtain walls, about 20 feet (7 m) high, were pierced by *putlog holes* through which beams projected to support the roofed wooden fighting galleries (*hourds*). Protected by the *hourds*, defenders could fire arrows and missiles, or pour noxious liquids and heated sand onto any attackers who crossed the moat.

By the Civil War (mid 1600s), Hemyock Castle and most of Hemyock belonged to the *Pophams*. It was garrisoned for Parliament, used to imprison Royalists and levy taxes to pay the Parliamentary armies. A Royalist attack was defeated, but they returned, besieged and captured the castle, releasing 200 prisoners and seizing 80 horses. They immediately hanged three of the garrison and marched the remainder off to prison in Exeter. Soon afterwards, it was recaptured and held for Parliament. Apparently, after his *restoration* in 1660, King Charles II ordered that it be *slighted*. The site became a farm. Stone from the castle ruins was ‘quarried’ for local buildings.

In the late 17th century, the stream was diverted and part of the moat filled in. In the early 1970s, the site was sold without its farm land, and the Parklands housing estate was built on Hemyock Castle farm’s old cider apple orchard.

Hemyock Castle Trail

1. The Gatehouse Arch. In front of you is the medieval manor house, with its later Cornish granite doorway. Behind you are the two Guard Houses (now residential cottages on long lets). Between these you can see St. Margaret’s Brook and the Norman tower of St. Mary’s Church. This stream used to flow through the farmyard and under the drawbridge where you are now standing, to form part of the moat.

Look back at the Gatehouse and notice the holes on either side of the archway. These held the beams that supported the drawbridge. Go through the archway, noticing the portcullis slot on your left and the remains of the older inner archway to the fortified manor house. The stone mounting block on your right helped knights in full armour mount their horses.

2. The Gatehouse Towers. Unaccompanied children are not allowed up the tower steps. You may climb the steps up the tower. **You do so at your own risk. Please do not allow unaccompanied children to go up.** Go up the mounting block steps, then keep to the left, next to the wall, until the iron railings start. Notice the portcullis slot. The portcullis and drawbridge would have been operated from a building above the archway.

The castle towers were higher than the present church tower, but even at only half the original height, this gatehouse tower still commands a good view of the surrounding area. All vegetation within about 150 yards would have been cleared. Any village houses would have been only one storey high. Marshy land in the valley provided further defence.

At the top, look down inside the tower. The square *putlog holes* held the beams (logs) used as scaffolding during construction, and later used as floor joists. The entrances to these two towers would have been from the curtain walls, with no other entrances below about 20 feet (7 m). The lowest levels were probably prisons; the unfortunate prisoners being lowered through a trap door in the floor. Above that, the store rooms, and finally the guards’ living quarters equipped with arrow slits commanding the entrance.

Be very careful going down the uneven steps. At the bottom, walk back through the archway, then left along the front of the manor house’s garden wall, and turn left past the old bay tree growing at the corner of the house.

3. The Bay Tree. In medieval times, Bay Trees were planted at the corners of houses, to keep away evil spirits. We are safe here! In the **North East Tower** opposite, notice the row of strange holes low-down in the walls, and the central pit. This tower may have been a dovecot, to supply fresh meat, as at Dunster and Bodiam Castles. The pit might have allowed defenders to draw water safely from the moat.

4. The Civil War Dungeon & Archaeology. This lean-to is outside the curtain wall, so must be a later building. Perhaps Parliamentarians imprisoned the Rev. James Burnard here? His story is on the wall. The display cases contain pottery sherds found on the castle site, some dating back to the 12th century, and some from vessels produced abroad. Their quality indicates that a prestigious family has lived here. See how the pottery changed over the centuries as the status of this site changed: eg. sherds from wine jugs and plates used in the Great Hall in medieval times; then later, cider jugs and cream bowls from the humble farm. The pieces of iron slag may date from nearby Romano-British smelting. Notice the whetstone batts. See the geophysical survey results.

Leaving the dungeon, turn right. On your right, the outside lavatory was originally a family ‘3-seater’ which drained into the moat. Notice *putlog holes* and remains of old lean-to buildings. Beyond the **North Interval Tower**, stones in the grass indicate the curtain wall running to the NW tower.

5. The Moat. Optional walk at your own risk. **No unaccompanied children are allowed down here.**

Take very great care. The steps are uneven. **Hold children by the hand.** Although the water is not usually deep, beneath it is very deep mud. The moat is now badly silted up. Until recently, this silt would have been dug out every year and spread; but the site is now a Scheduled Ancient Monument and we are not allowed to do this. The path leads to...

6. The North West Tower. At the end of the moat walk, notice the medieval rendering still remaining on the outside of the NW tower. Originally the outside of all the towers and curtain walls would have been rendered and lime washed; to protect the mortar, make climbing harder, and make Hemyock Castle look even more formidable. Stones in the grass indicate the original shape of this tower and the curtain wall running south from it. The curtain wall continued roughly along the line of the blackberry hedge.

Go south towards the modern bridge over the moat. You are welcome to view the moat from this bridge. The bridge is slippery when wet. **Take care of children.**

Continue past the entrance to the Interpretation Centre, to...

7. The South West Tower. The stone garden wall is only about 150-200 years old. It has been built over part of the SW Tower using stones from the original curtain walls. The base of this tower still exists preserved underground, including its ground-level entrance with a spiral staircase and the slot for the wooden door-post. All corner towers would have had similar ground-level entrances. Return to the...

8. Interpretation Centre. This building was formed out of the old Carpenter's Shop, itself built over older buildings. Apparently, human skeletons were discovered under this floor. Amongst other things, cider barrels were made here.

Enter through the old arched doorway. The very old timber on the floor supporting the wooden screen on your right is probably the base of the original screen that once sheltered people in the medieval Great Hall from draughts. When William the Conqueror landed at Hastings in 1066, this old timber would already have been a well grown Oak.

Imagine that you are in a medieval building. Old windows from the old house have been hung along the walls, under a 'timeline' scale. Through these windows you can see a local artist's impressions of scenes depicting various aspects of the history of the site. Follow the numbered exhibits around the centre – time runs clockwise around the room – and imagine yourself back in the days when these characters were living at Hemyock Castle. See other paintings by local artists.

The Model, based on careful research, portrays the original 1380 castle. Note the rendering and lime wash on the outside of the castle, and the second, angled gatehouse entrance.

Sir John Popham, Queen Elizabeth I's Lord Chief Justice, was involved in sentencing to death: Mary Queen of Scots (1587), Earl of Essex (1601), Sir Walter Raleigh (1603), Guy Fawkes (1606). There are many scurrilous stories about him; many are impossible. He bought Hemyock and the Castle.

Civil War Period. Hemyock Castle was held for Parliament; used as a strong point, a prison, and a base for levying the taxes to fund Parliamentary forces. In March 1643/44 Royalists attacked twice: Their first attack was beaten off, but they soon returned with a much larger force, capturing Hemyock Castle. They liberated 200 royalist prisoners, hanged 3 defenders, & led the remainder in chains to Exeter. It is said that King Charles II later demanded that Hemyock Castle be *slighted* (destroyed), for having opposed his father.

Farmer Tuck leased Hemyock Castle farm in the 1840s. By now, the old medieval great hall had become a humble farm kitchen. One of his daughters was in service to Hemyock's Rector, Edward William Leyborne Popham BA.

Licence to Crenellate, Granted on 5th November 1380. King Richard II, the boy king who in 1381 faced down Wat Tyler's "Peasants' Revolt," granted Sir William and Lady Margaret the *Licence to Crenellate* their Hemyock manor house by surrounding it with a 'wall of stone and lime': Effectively, planning permission to build a castle. Here, as a cleric reads this *licence* aloud, Lady Margaret is deciding which jewels to sell to help finance the castle building work. Notice copies of the 1380 documents, now stored at Kew.

General John Graves Simcoe was Governor of Upper Canada, where in 1793, he abolished slavery, saving the lives of tens of thousands of slaves escaping from the USA via *The Underground Railroad*. He is still greatly revered in Canada. He lived nearby at Wolford Lodge. His Wolford Chapel is now Canadian soil. He was convinced that this was a Roman site. Gen. Simcoe's dream was to restore Hemyock Castle to its former medieval glory. He did some work here, reputedly using French POWs, but died before achieving his ambition; when due to become commander of British forces in India. His wife Elizabeth was a skilled artist. She created illustrated diaries of their travels in Canada. See our website.

Peter Orlando Hutchinson visited several times during the 1850s. He would like to have seen Hemyock Castle restored. See the copies of his paintings. Postcards are available.

Return via the path around the fence, go past the Gatehouse archway to the...

9. Farmyard. Notice the old farm buildings. The sheds have been formed out of the old open *linney* (open-fronted barns). Animals were kept below and their fodder above. The fronts were soon covered in to give better shelter. A traditional dog kennel under the old stone steps is where farm dogs would have slept. Notice the metal lined shed door. This is where the Castle Farm boar lived. Apparently he was so fierce that the door had to be lined with metal to keep him in!

10. The Cider Press. Cider was important – a part of the farm labourers' wages – so without good cider it was hard to retain good labourers on a farm. Cider was also sold locally.

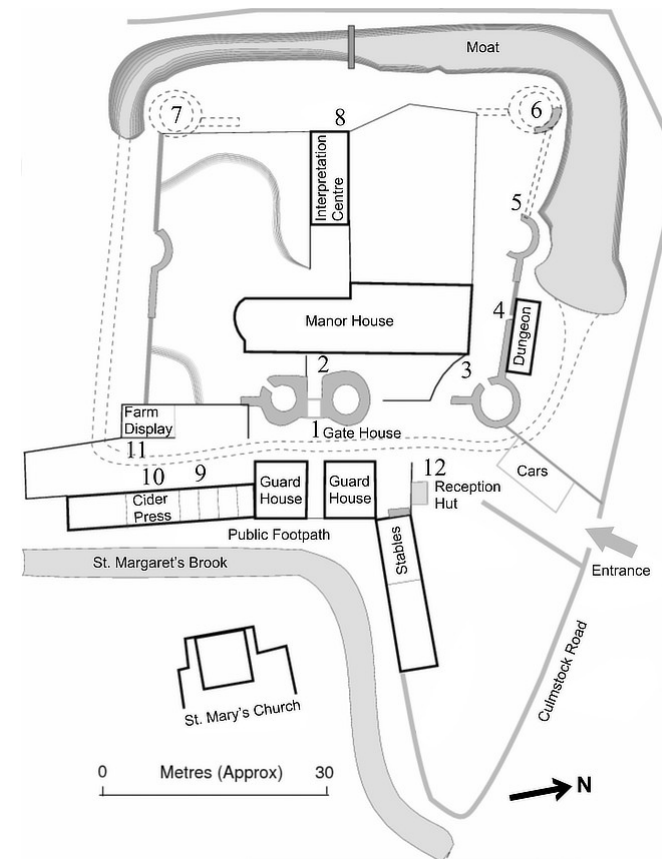
Castle Farm cider was made in the 'cellar,' the southern end of the farm house, using animal & then mechanical power to drive the apple-mill machinery via a series of belts & shafts.

This cider press dates from the mid 18th century. Originally it had twin wooden screws; improved during the early 19th century. by the installation of a single iron screw. The apple-mill on the left was bought in the mid 19th century to chop apples before they were tipped into the press, as layers of *cheeses*, sandwiched between horsehair blankets.

The old wooden staircase came from the castle's cider cellar. The enormous cider barrel was made in the Carpenter's Shop. After making new barrels, they were rolled between the Guard Houses, and down into the stream to swell the wood. Barrels were also cleaned in the stream.

11. Cow Parlour. The car ports were originally *shippen* (cow parlours) where the cows were milked. The remaining parlour contains a 20th century wartime display including Land Army items, and traditional farm implements.

12. Reception Hut. Postcards and souvenirs are available.



Hemyock Castle, Culmstock Road, Hemyock, CULLOMPTON, Devon, EX15 3RJ

Open: Bank Holiday Mondays, 2-5pm, Easter to September. Comfortable cottages within castle grounds, are available on long-term lets.

Our guide booklet and website contain more information.

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