

Hever Castle: Kent, England

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

We're blessed to live in a part of England that is steeped in history and, among other things, that means castles dating back hundreds of years.

I guess it's no surprise that we have so many castles in our part of the world, as we're right on the coastline, with France only 30 miles or so away across the English Channel. Of course, in days gone by, that represented a great threat and wherever you have a great threat, it made sense to build castles to defend your land.

One such defensive bastion is Hever Castle in the county (the U.S. equivalent of a state) of Kent. The site is within easy reach of London, with day tours often running from the capital that include a visit to Hever Castle.

It's fair to say that some castles have more history than others, and that's very much the case with Hever Castle. What makes it so special is one family who played a pivotal part in British history, the Boleyns. The family bought the castle, which dates back to 1270, in the early 1500s and added a Tudor dwelling to the existing gatehouse. This was the childhood home of Anne Boleyn, otherwise known as the second of King Henry VIII's six wives. In those days, the idea of a king having a second wife was unheard of, unless his first should tragically die. In this case though, wife number one was very much alive, but Henry decided that he wanted to marry Anne, and that meant a divorce. This was something the church at the time couldn't contemplate, but that was a small matter for Henry, who was determined that church leaders wouldn't stand in the way of his wishes. This led to the establishment of the Church of England, with the British King or Queen as the supreme head of the church, rather than that authority lying in Rome, as it had done for many hundreds of years. That's why the name of Anne Boleyn and King Henry VIII are so well known in British history.

It's probably this link that attracts many visitors to Hever Castle, but there's much more to the castle's history than just that, a fact I never realized until our recent visit. After King Henry ordered the beheading of his second wife for treason, Hever Castle was taken away from the Boleyn family as punishment and was later passed on to Henry's fourth wife, Anne of Cleves. It then passed through the ownership of a number of different families, before finally settling with the Astor family in the early 1900s, and this is where it was really brought back to life. By then, the castle needed someone who was prepared to invest a lot of time, money, and indeed love into the castle and that's exactly what William

Waldorf Astor did -- and that's why it now makes such a great place to visit.

All too often, when you go to castles, there's something to see inside the main building itself and then there are usually gardens or grounds surrounding it for you to wander through, but not normally much to take in. Hever Castle is a very different beast. Inside the castle, they take you on a tour of life in Tudor times, when Anne Boleyn would have lived there. On display are two prayer books, signed and inscribed by Anne. It's amazing to look at them and realize that the writing in front of you dates from such a famous woman, writing more than five hundred years earlier.

Elsewhere, you can see costumed figures of King Henry VIII and all six of his wives. I couldn't help but stand there and gawp at the richness of those costumes. I don't doubt for one moment that wearing those costumes was no fun at all, but my goodness, they did look stunning with their beautiful, vibrant colors.

There are also exhibit rooms that explain about the castle's later history and how the British Royal family tree progressed after the Tudors. We came away feeling that there was a great deal to learn there, particularly for younger members of the family. And those younger members will no doubt love the display of weapons in the Council Chamber that includes instruments of torture and execution. Reading the descriptions of some of those implements is enough to make your eyes water!

Part of the beauty of Hever Castle is that there's so much more to see outside, and a lot of that is down to the work that was done about 100 years ago. 125 acres of spectacular gardens and a lake were created in the grounds, including an Italian garden, complete with sculpture items from Italy, some dating back up to 2,000 years. It was quite a sight and not something that you expect to see at a traditional English castle. As we walked through the gardens, we could tell that they'd been created with a great deal of care and attention.

Another highlight was the Rose Garden, packed with thousands of specimens, although sadly during our visit, their blooms were drawing to a close. I can imagine how it must look at the height of the season. Elsewhere is a Yew Maze to get lost in and a Water Maze that's very much aimed at younger age groups, as it offers the chance to get as wet as you like with jumping water and fountains to be found in various nooks and crannies.

Perhaps the best compliment I can pay to Hever Castle is to say that

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usually when we visit somewhere, we anticipate spending a couple of hours there at most, but this was different, with the vast majority of the day spent exploring the castle, its grounds, and all it had to offer.

[Hever Castle](#) is open daily from Easter to October 31 each year, with more limited opening during the winter months. [Tickets](#) are available to see either just the gardens or the castle and gardens, but for the extra money, it's well worth taking the option of the castle and gardens. You won't be disappointed with what you find inside the castle.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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