

The World's Loveliest Castle: Leeds Castle

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

The world's loveliest castle. It's a bold claim to make, but that's how Leeds Castle in the southeast of England has been known for many years and with good reason.

Built nearly 1,000 years ago in the heart of Kent, about 40 miles away from London, the Castle sits on an island in the River Len and it really is everything you ever imagined a castle to be. As you drive up to the car park, you wonder when you'll catch a glimpse of the castle. The answer is not until you're well inside the grounds, which just adds to the sense of anticipation.

The first area you come to along the visitor route through the grounds is the Duckery. If you're lucky, you might spot some of the black swans that make their home here. They're not the only wildlife that makes for some beautiful photos, with peacocks also strutting around the castle grounds. As you continue to wander down towards the castle, you'll pass the Cedar Lawn and Pavilion Lawn and it is here that you get your first view of the castle itself. Even now, after many visits, the sight of Leeds Castle still stops me in my tracks. It's been said that "breathtaking" is a word that's used too often nowadays, but it certainly applies in this case.

So what's the history of this magnificent building? The castle was built in 1119 and then moved into royal hands just over a hundred years later. Perhaps the most famous visitor was King Henry VIII, famed for his six wives. He was a regular visitor, once arriving with his then Queen, Catherine of Aragon, and their entire court on the way to a tournament in France. Now, that must have been a sight! When he died, his son, King Edward VI, granted the castle to one of Henry's courtiers in return for his service. Since being in private ownership, Leeds Castle has had something of a checkered past, having been used as a garrison, prison and even a convalescent home.

A lot of what you see when you visit today is due to the work of one woman, Olive Wilson Filmer, who later became Lady Baillie. She took ownership of the castle in 1926 and had big ambitions for it, wanting to see it restored to its former glory. As you wander through the castle, many of the furnishings you see are due to Lady Baillie. Unfortunately, no photography is allowed inside the castle, but take a leisurely pace on your walk through the castle and the memories of the beautiful rooms

will stay with you for a long time.

As you come out of the castle itself and pass back through the Gate, don't miss what must be one of the most unusual museums in the world, dedicated to dog collars. Yes, you did read that right! Although it doesn't sound that interesting, it's a fascinating collection, spanning more than five centuries, and is well worth a look.

Once work inside the castle was completed, Lady Baillie turned her attention to the grounds. Under her direction a golf course, tennis courts, and a swimming pool were added. It must have been quite some family home!

Today the golf course remains, as does the aviary she founded in the 1950s. Originally home to a few Australian finches, today you'll see toucans, parrots and even kookaburras. It's quite a collection and one that certainly keeps children's interest, but there's nothing more appealing at Leeds Castle than one of the final areas you come to.

The maze is about as far away from the entrance to the castle grounds as possible. No doubt that's been done on purpose to make sure that it's the final thing visitors come across. Made from more than 2,000 yew trees, it looks deceptively simple from the outside, but once inside, it's only minutes before you're lost and desperately struggling to find your way to the center of the maze. Once you do -- and it can take some time -- it's worth it, as you descend into a shell grotto, a suitable reward for all the running around you have to do to get here.

These days, a visit to Leeds Castle is about much more than just the castle, but there's no denying it's still the main draw and rightly so. It's certainly one of the finest examples you'll find of a medieval castle. To see it sitting on its own island, surrounded by water, perhaps even with a black swan floating past - you really can imagine King Henry VIII setting up court here all those centuries ago. After nearly 1,000 years of history, the castle still looks to be in perfect condition and resembles a picture postcard. I challenge you not to come here and take a lot of photos! Yes, it's a bold claim to say it's the world's loveliest castle, but you know, I don't think they're that far off the mark.

Leeds Castle is open throughout the year, except on Christmas Day and is closed to day visitors during the major classical concert in early July and the fireworks displays during the first weekend in November. Entry to Leeds Castle and its grounds costs £14 for adults and £11 for senior citizens, students, visitors with disabilities, and children between the ages of four and fifteen. Children under four get in for free. All entry tickets are valid for a year. For more information,

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visit <http://www.leeds-castle.com>

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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