

Mere Castle

This early English castle was built on Castle Hill overlooking the Royal Manor of Mere. It was built in 1253 by Richard, Earl of Cornwall, a brother of Henry III and son of King John. Richard had donated £1000 to the Knights Hospitallers for the assistance of Pilgrims to the Holy Land. In recognition of this generosity he was granted the Manor of Mere in 1245 and eight years later was given permission to build a fortified castle.

From a document giving details of repairs it would appear that the castle was of a rectangular construction and consisted of 6 lead covered towers, a hall and an inner and outer gate. A warder was on watch duty during the daytime and a night watchman at night, both in the charge of the Castle Constable. The castle also boasted a deep well and a dungeon. There was a resident priest who was responsible for the Chapel and his duties included saying Mass for Earl Richard's mother Queen Berengaria. It would seem that the castle was built rather hurriedly since circa 1303 the North Tower collapsed and extensive repairs were carried out. An alabaster work of the Magi was unearthed in a garden at the bottom of the hill in the late 19th century which many experts believe came from the chapel in the castle. This now hangs on the north wall of the chance in St. Michael's Church.

The Earl of Cornwall lived at some point in the castle also having a residence in Hertfordshire. He also spent many years abroad travelling. After the death of Richard's son Edmund the Manor of Mere reverted for a while to Crown administer by a Steward at Mere Park until the end of the 17th century.

At the end of the 13th century there were two very important figures that occupied the castle. The first was the Abbot of Scone arrested by the Sheriff of Wiltshire at Winchester and charges with being a rebel and a traitor. (This being the period of Edward I's battles for control of Scotland). The abbot was probably held in the dungeon since he was ordered to be imprisoned and chained by the Steward at the time, Richard de Chiseldene. The second was the Countess Margaret the estranged wife of Edward Plantagenet who became Earl of Cornwall in 1296. The Countess was banished to the castle and held a virtual prisoner in what became known as the Countess's Tower.

At some point the castle became unoccupied and not maintained and soon fell into disrepair. The stone from the castle is thought to have been used to build the houses in Mere village but it is not known for certain how long the castle remained standing. In 1660 Aubrey wrote quoting Francis Potter 'here was anciently a castle'. Francis Potter was Rector at Kilmington and was born in the vicarage at Mere.

Celia Fiennes, diarist and widely travelled lady made a visit to Mere between 1689 and 1674 during a horseback tour of the West Country. The Castle site attracted her interest which she explored and found a small underground room where some digging had taken place beforehand. A flagpole was to be erected on the hill in celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and whilst digging the hole to house the flagpole a vaulted passage of about 5 feet wide was uncovered.

The Bull Ring as it is known since it was used as a bull-baiting arena can be found on the west side of Castle Hill as it joins Long Hill. The area of Castle Hill today is a tranquil area where children play and explore, local residents and visitors can stroll the hill where there are magnificent views across the countryside from all angles. The area is abundant with flora and fauna of all kinds and the hill is still used today as a beacon for major celebrations such as the Queen's Jubilee when a bonfire is lit on the summit of the hill as it did at the time of the Spanish Armada.



Castle Hill, Mere (Photos by Colin Smith)

The hill dominates the Wiltshire village of Mere. Today there is no sign of the castle which the Earl of Cornwall had built there in 1253.

