

Hemyock Castle – A Brief History

At first sight, it is perhaps hard to imagine Hemyock Castle in its Medieval heyday. Over the years, part of the moat has been filled in to form a farmyard & only fragments of the castle defences remain. But with the help of the exhibits you can begin to appreciate how it must have looked.

This is possibly a Roman site, a Romano-British farm, or a Roman stronghold. But there has not yet been a proper excavation.

During the 1100s the Norman *Hidon* family built a fortified manor house. Later, the *Dynhams* (originally from Brittany) married into the family.

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 rectangular site with tall round corner towers and central interval towers, connected by a high curtain wall; all topped with crenellations. Most buildings were of *chert*, a local flint stone.

Two towers at the front, about 13 metres (40 feet) high, formed the entrance gatehouse. This housed the portcullis and the drawbridge over the moat.

The curtain walls, about 7 metres (20 feet) high, were pierced by *putlog holes* through which beams projected to support the roofed galleries (*hourdes*). From the safety of these, defenders could fire arrows and missiles, or pour noxious liquids 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 and used to imprison Royalists. Eventually, after surviving one attack, it was besieged & captured by the Royalists. 200 prisoners were released. Three of the garrison were hanged immediately, and the remainder marched off to prison in Exeter. Not long afterwards, it was recaptured and held for Parliament. Apparently, King Charles II ordered that it be *slighted*, after his *restoration* in 1660. The site became a farm & stone from the castle ruins was quarried for local buildings. Later in the 17th century, the stream was diverted & part of the moat was filled in. The house was sold without the farm land in the early 1970s. The Parklands housing estate was built on the Castle's old apple orchard.

The Trail

1. The Gatehouse Arch. In front of you is the medieval manor house. Behind you are the two Guard Houses (now self-catering holiday cottages). 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. On your right, you will see the stone mounting block which made it easier for knights in full armour to climb onto their horses.

2. The Gate House. 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. When you reach the mounting block steps, 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.

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. There were no entrances to these towers below about 7 metres, where there would have been entrances from the curtain wall. 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.

The castle towers were higher than the present church tower, but even at only half the original height, this gate house tower still commands a good view of the surrounding area. Originally, all vegetation within about 150 metres would have been removed, and village houses would have been only one storey high. Marshy land provided further defence.

Be very careful going down the uneven steps. At the bottom, walk right, along the side of the manor house, and then turn left past the old bay tree growing on the corner of the house.

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

4. The Civil War Dungeon. Notice the *putlog holes* in the curtain wall opposite the bay tree. You may enter the dungeon. The prison is a lean-to built outside the curtain wall, so it must be a later addition. It may have been here that the **Rev. James Burnard** was imprisoned by the Parliamentarians. His story is on the wall. The display cases contain pottery shards found on the site, some dating back to the 12th century, and some from vessels produced abroad. The quality indicates that a prestigious family lived here. It is interesting to note how the pottery changed over the centuries; eg. shards from wine jugs and plates used in the Great Hall in Medieval times; then later, cider jugs and cream bowls from the farm. There are also pieces of iron slag which may date from Roman times.

Leaving the dungeon, turn right. On your right, notice the outside lavatory. Now modernised, it was originally a family 3-seater which drained into the moat. Notice putlog holes.

The picnic area is bounded by the ruins of the North interval tower and of the North West tower. Stones indicate the connecting curtain wall.

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 very deep, beneath it is very deep mud. The moat is now very silted up. In Medieval times, this silt would have been dug out every year. However 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 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 - a most impressive sight! Stones indicate the original shape of this tower, and the curtain wall running south from it.

Go south towards the modern bridge over the moat. The bridge is slippery when wet. Take care of children.

You are welcome to view the moat from this bridge. The blackberry hedge marks the approximate line of the curtain wall. Continuing past the entrance to the Interpretation Centre, you will see marked out:

7. The South Tower. The stone garden wall is only about 150-200 years old. It has been built over part of the South Tower using stones from the original curtain wall. Notice the entrance to the tower. All the entrances would have been like this. You can see the slot for the wooden post which held the door into the tower. Return to the:

8. Interpretation Centre. This building was formed out of the old Carpenter's Shop. It was in here that cider barrels were made. The Carpenter's Shop was built over older buildings. Human skeletons are reputed to have been discovered under this floor.

Enter through the old arched doorway and 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 the windows you can see a local artist's impressions of scenes depicting various aspects of the history of the site. On your right, the very old timber on the floor supporting the wooden screen, is probably the base of the original screen that helped keep the draughts off those in the Great Hall in Medieval times. This timber must have been a well grown Oak when William the Conqueror landed at Hastings in 1066.

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.

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.

General John Graves Simcoe owned much land at Dunkeswell, and lived nearby at Wolford Lodge. There is a small display relating to him. He 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. Although Gen. Simcoe had a life packed with action and adventure, his dream was to restore Hemyock Castle to its former Medieval glory. He did some work here, reputedly with the help of French prisoners of war, but died before achieving his ambition. He was convinced that this was a Roman site. His wife Elizabeth was a skilled artist. She created illustrated diaries of their travels in Canada.

Peter Orlando Hutchison visited here in the mid 19th century. See the copies of his paintings. As with Gen. Simcoe, he would have liked to have seen Hemyock Castle restored.

If you would like to read more about the history of Hemyock castle, there is a history on sale here and at the Reception Hut, together with postcards of Orlando Hutchison's paintings, and other souvenirs.

Return via the path around the fence, go past the Gate House archway to the:

9. Farmyard. Notice the old farm buildings. Under the old stone steps, now full of stones, is the traditional dog kennel where farm dogs would have slept. The sheds have been formed out of the old open *linney* (open-fronted barns). The animals were kept below, and their fodder above.

Notice the metal lined door. This is where the Castle Farm boar lived. Apparently he was very fierce so the door had to be lined with metal to keep him in!

10. The Cider Press. Cider was important: Part of the farm labourers' wages was paid in cider, so without good cider it was very difficult to retain good labourers on a farm.

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

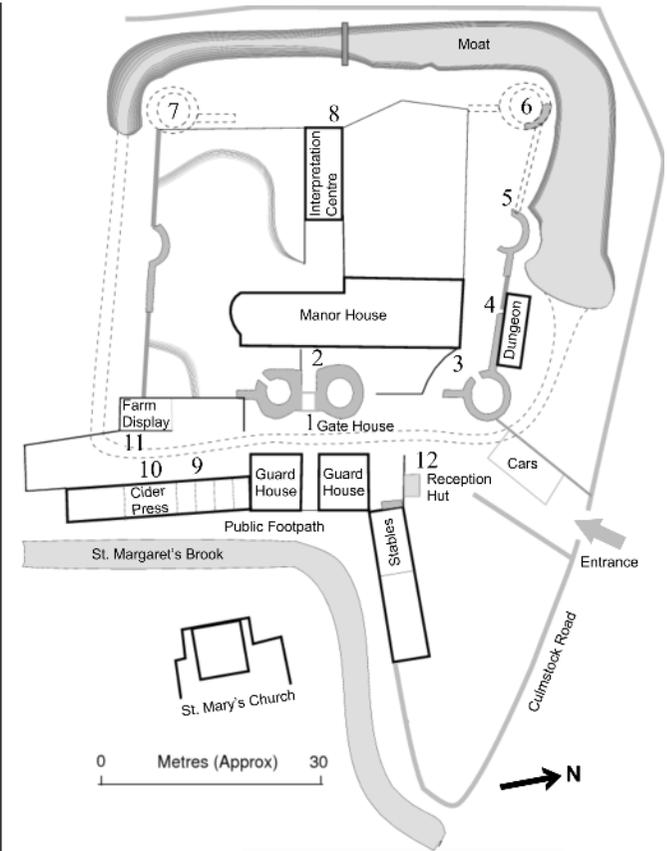
This cider press dates from the mid 18th century and originally had twin wooden screws. During the early 19th century it was improved by the installation of a single iron screw.

To the left of the cider press is an apple-mill. This was bought in the mid 19th century to chop apples before they were tipped into the press.

The old wooden staircase used to be in the cider cellar. The enormous cider barrel was made in the Carpenter's Shop. After making such 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. Souvenirs are available. We do hope that you've enjoyed this brief tour.



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

5 miles south of Wellington, M5 Junction 26
See: <https://www.hemyockcastle.uk/travel.html>

Open: Bank Holiday Mondays, 2 to 5 pm.
Easter to September.

Comfortable castle cottages, within castle grounds, available on long-term lets.