

Travel and Adventure: The lords and ladies of Leeds Castle loved their dogs

by Sharon Whitley Larsen

KENT, England - As I strolled around the grounds and gardens of gorgeous, romantic Leeds Castle - the second-most-popular tourist attraction in Kent, after Canterbury Cathedral - absorbing its 900-year history, imagine my surprise when I came across its Dog Collar Museum. Leave it to the Brits, I chuckled, to honor the history of their beloved canines with such a place.

LOOKING AT LEEDS - Leeds Castle, home to the Dog Collar Museum, opened for tours in 1976 and 10 million people have visited since. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. THE CASTLE WITH THE COLLARS - Samples of 17th and 18th century German and Austrian baroque leather collars on display at the Dog Collar Museum with explanations in Braille. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. GATEHOUSE BRIDGE - The entrance to Leeds Castle, the Gatehouse bridge, is the location of a scene in an upcoming movie about the life of Queen Elizabeth I. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. POOCH PORTRAIT - An 18th century German portrait of dogs belonging to an English officer hangs at the wall of the Dog Collar Museum. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. Intrigued, I entered the small museum to see what it was all about. Besides a gift shop that sells everything from dog-themed books, stationery, umbrellas, walking sticks and handbags, it also displayed more than 100 collars spanning five centuries, most housed in glass cases.

A sign proclaimed it as "The largest collection of dog collars in the world, tracing the history of canine neckwear from medieval to modern times." And that it's the only museum of its kind in Great Britain. No doubt!

These collars on display aren't for ordinary Fidos: There are extraordinary 17th and 18th century German and Austrian baroque leather collars, which were often decorated with metalwork and velvet, intended mainly for decoration, as well as to identify the dog and its owner. There are engraved silver collars, some designed by the leading silversmiths of their day. One was for a pup dubbed Tabinet, "The Property of Earl Talbot," who won the Great Champion Puppy Stake for All England, 1838.

There's also a French bronze collar circa 1800; a German hinged collar, early 1700s; an Austrian collar with the coat of arms of its owner, from the mid-1700s; and an Italian brass collar, mid-1600s. The most common collars date from the 19th century, usually consisting of a simple brass ring, with rolled edges to prevent skin chafing, secured by a padlock. There are also examples of collars worn by service dogs during World War II, and recent additions from the Battersea Dogs' Home and National Canine Defence League.

People walking their dogs today may not realize that, originally, dog collars from the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries were designed as defense, to protect hunting dogs during the period when wild boar, bears and wolves roamed Europe's forests. Back then the dogs' vulnerable throats were protected by broad iron collars adorned with sharp spikes. Throughout the centuries the collars' style and purpose has changed.

The Dog Collar Museum was launched after Gertrude Hunt donated her family's vast antique collar collection to Leeds Castle Foundation in 1979 in memory of her husband, John, a distinguished medieval scholar, and in honor of the castle's former owner, Lady Baillie. Since then, it has been expanded by private donations and purchases.

And, in a way, it's fitting that this museum should be here, on what was once the castle's squash court, and previously its coach house. Dogs were always present at the castle throughout the centuries, whether they were huge mastiffs guarding the castle gates, hounds for hunting or spaniels and lapdogs adorning the royal rooms. The castle's last private owner for nearly 50 years was thrice-married, American-born heiress Olive Wilson Filmer, later Lady Baillie, a dog lover herself. Drawings of her terrier Smudge and of her Great Danes Boots and Danny by Spanish artist Alejo Vidal-Quadras hang in a castle corridor. And the many dogs she loved during her life were buried beside the Cedar Pond on the castle grounds, each grave marked with its own headstone, although only three remain today.

During the 1930s and '40s, Lady Baillie entertained politicians, British and European royalty, artists and actors - including Errol Flynn, Noel Coward, Douglas Fairbanks, David Niven, Charlie Chaplin and Jimmy Stewart - at glamorous weekend parties. Throughout portions of both World Wars, the castle was used as a hospital, and during World War II it was secretly used to develop weapons and safety systems.

Lady Baillie, who lived at the castle longer than any other owner in its history, died in 1974 at age 75, bequeathing it and the surrounding 500 acres to the Leeds Castle Foundation, a charitable trust earmarked to preserve the property in perpetuity, maintaining it as a living house for the public's enjoyment.

Leeds Castle (originally dubbed Esleds by the Saxons) is set on two islands on the River Len in the heart of the vivid-green Kent countryside. It was once described by the historian Lord Conway as the loveliest castle in

the whole world. Originally the site of a Saxon manor, it was then a Norman stronghold, where one of William the Conqueror's lords, Robert de Crevecoeur, fortified and built a castle in 1119. Later, in 1278, it was acquired for the crown during the reign of Edward I, the founder of Parliament. Over the next 300 years, it remained a royal residence, subsequently for kings, including Edward III, Richard II and Henry V, whose widow, Catherine de Valois, was the last queen to personally hold the property.

Only 21 when her husband the king died, she caused a scandal by falling in love with Owen Tudor, the Welsh clerk of her wardrobe. When their affair was discovered, they were imprisoned. She was later released and he eventually escaped, enabling them to secretly marry. Their son Edmund became the father of Henry VII, and thus began England's Tudor dynasty.

Queen Catherine acquired the castle in 1422, installing a bell and clock in 1435. The clock still strikes on the hour, and the bell was rung to honor Queen Elizabeth II's visit in 1981.

During the period of 1293-1552, the castle became part of the dower of the queens of England; since it was a settlement for six widowed medieval queens, it was thereby known as the "Ladies' Castle."

It was also a favorite palace of Henry VIII, who added his extensive touches and used it as a stop on his trips to France; Italian marble busts of Henry and his three children - Mary I, Elizabeth I and Edward VI - thought to be carved before 1569, are displayed in the Queen's Gallery. After Henry died, his son Edward VI, no longer needing the castle, granted it to a private citizen for services to the crown, and from then on it was owned by private families, including the St. Legers, Culpepers, Fairfaxes, Sykeham Martins, and, of course, Lady Baillie, who all made their own changes to the property.

Lord Fairfax had the castle's sundial installed in 1750, which tells the time in Virginia, where he had an estate. Later, in 1822, large parts of the castle were demolished and rebuilt - and a new portion added - at a cost of nearly 34,000 pounds. And in 1984 some rooms were redesigned, including the Queen's Room.

Today some half a million annually tour Leeds Castle, which is about an hour from London by train; since its

1976 opening, over 10 million have visited. It is also used as a site for concerts, weddings, receptions, conferences and filming. In fact, some exterior shots of Leeds Castle, including the Gatehouse's stone bridge, the castle's entrance, were filmed for "Elizabeth: The Golden Age," a movie with Cate Blanchett about the life of Queen Elizabeth I, which will have its world premiere at the 32nd annual Toronto International Film Festival, Sept. 6-15, and open in the U.S. Oct. 12.

I don't know if Blanchett got a chance to tour The Dog Collar Museum, but that will surely give her a reason to return!

IF YOU GO

For information on schedules, ticket prices, getting there by car, bus or train, visit www.leeds-castle.com.

For free maps, brochures, vacation planning advice and a wide selection of passes and transport tickets, call VisitBritain at 800-462-2748, or visit www.visitbritain.com and www.britrail.com.

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