

Clarendon Palace

Most people living close to Salisbury may have heard of the royal castle at Old Sarum where the Domesday Survey results were collated and where, in 1086, William the Conqueror summoned all the most powerful men in the realm to swear an oath of loyalty. I suspect fewer would have heard of another fascinating site just two and a half miles east of Salisbury that was an important royal residence in the Middle Ages.

Clarendon Palace was established in the early twelfth century by Henry 1st as a royal deer park, used for hunting and complete with a hunting lodge and mews for the King's birds of prey. Under the reigns of Henry 2nd and Henry 3rd it developed into an impressive residence with buildings surrounding a courtyard that included a great hall, stables, kitchens and accommodation for the royal family and visiting nobility. It had terraced gardens and was surrounded by a small wall and entered through an impressive gateway. Much of the early work was planned and supervised by Elias of Dereham who oversaw the building of Salisbury Cathedral. In the 1250s luxurious accommodation was built for Queen Eleanor of Provence, wife of Henry 3rd. This included a great hall, a chapel and several spacious rooms that included beautifully tiled floors that were made in a kiln on the site.

The important Constitutions of Clarendon were produced at the palace by a meeting of 1800 nobles and clergy in 1164. Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury was present at the meeting. The Constitutions limited the rights of Clergy to be tried in ecclesiastical courts which gave more lenient sentences than secular courts. At first Becket agreed to the changes but he later resisted the Constitutions and fled in exile to the continent. After Becket eventually returned to the country, Henry 2nd made the fatal remark, "Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?". This led to the murder of Becket, his being made a saint and Henry doing penance at Canterbury Cathedral.

Over the years use as a royal palace declined and by 1500 it was in a state of poor repair. When Queen Elizabeth 1st visited in 1574 the deer park was still well stocked and 340 deer were killed in the royal hunt. The queen however had to dine in a temporary banqueting house because of the poor state of the buildings and she stayed in Wilton. In the 1660s after the Restoration of Charles 2nd the palace was sold by the crown and passed to Edward Hyde who took the title of Earl of Clarendon. A new mansion was built in the park and the palace became a picturesque ruin.

The palace is now a beautifully maintained site with well-designed information boards and is set in stunning countryside. Llamas patrol the romantic ruins helping to control the weeds. The palace has no car park the site can only be reached on foot. This enhances the now peaceful atmosphere of the ruins which is a contrast to its past history. Maps of walks to the palace are on the internet and available from the tourist information office in Salisbury. There is an active Friends of Clarendon Palace group who help to preserve the site, produce a newsletter and organise talks and lectures. Details are on the internet. It is well worth taking one of the lovely walks from Pitton or Salisbury to visit the palace. The walks have magnificent views and the isolated atmospheric ruins provide a welcome respite from the pressures of modern life.

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