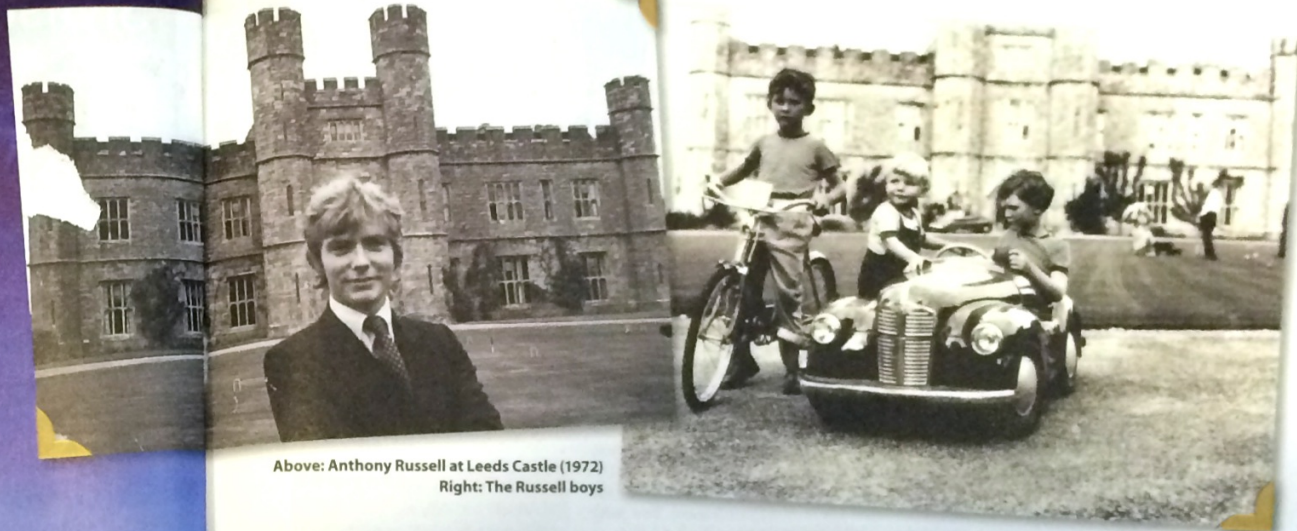


My FAIRYTALE childhood

Ever wondered what it's like to grow up in an historic building? Anthony Russell tells Melonie Clarke about his life less ordinary in Leeds Castle...



Above: Anthony Russell at Leeds Castle (1972)
Right: The Russell boys



Leeds Castle and Maiden's Tower
From left: The swimming pool at Leeds Castle; Lady Baillie's bedroom; the drawing room



Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Anthony Russell - these are just a few of the lucky souls who grew up in a castle. But wait a minute. Who's Anthony Russell? I don't remember him from the fairytales. Well, it turns out that Anthony is the rather fortunate chap who spent his childhood in magnificent Leeds Castle.

Hailed by one historian as 'the loveliest castle in the world', Leeds

Castle, in Kent, certainly has a fascinating history. The first stone castle was built on the site by a Norman baron in 1119. In 1278 it became a royal palace and remained a royal residence for the next 300 years - in fact, it was the private property of six medieval queens.

Anthony Russell's grandmother, Lady Baillie (a wealthy Anglo-American heiress), purchased the property in 1926 and fully restored its fairytale glory. But what was it like to grow up

surrounded by a moat, mighty walls - and all that history?

'I didn't really talk that much about it unless people asked. It normally wasn't the first thing I'd say to people; I kept it under my hat. It's not exactly something one starts a conversation with,' Anthony laughs.

'It was so special that I was privileged to enjoy my childhood there. Incredibly special,' he tells me.

'It sounds very curious to say it but I was surprised that everyone didn't

'It was so special that I had my childhood there but I was surprised that everyone didn't live like me'



Left: Anthony's parents, The Hon Geoffrey and Mrs Russell, Leeds Castle (c. 1940s)
Above: Anthony (with guitar) and siblings in the Maiden's Tower 'playroom'

live like me. It sounds completely ridiculous as a concept but that's what I thought.'

The 'exquisite, romantic, medieval and imposing' castle he called home '... never failed to look anything other than awesome, swanky, huge and gorgeous'.

Anthony lived in the main castle until his sister was born in 1960, when the family moved to the Maiden's Tower where his mother lived until her death in 2001.

'Essentially I had half of my childhood in the castle itself and half in >



Mickey Renshaw: one of Lady Baillie's friends



Above: Nanny Penny (c.1958)

Right: Lady Baillie, Anthony's grandmother, with her German shepherd, Elsa (1960s)



the tower. I was able to enjoy the magnificence of both and the really spectacular surroundings of both.

'When my mother died, I understood that everything was going to change [the castle was handed over to be run by a foundation as opposed to the family]. But my goodness, how could anybody be so lucky as me?'

Living in such a grand home, there were, of course, staff to help keep things running.

'There was always a butler and some footmen, very discreetly pottering around. There were many, many housemaids, sometimes up to 20 but I think that was before the Second World War when things were really operating at a remarkable level of comfort.

'They were incredibly discreet; it was the most extraordinary thing. I sort of noticed it in as much as I didn't see them, but they were there. They sort of magically melted into the walls when you went by.

'I had an absolutely magnificent nanny, I loved her to death and she

took care of me. She really, really took care of me. Obviously, I did see my parents but I didn't see them that much. As a little thing, the castle seemed so vast and sometimes I wondered if they'd make it up in the evening to see me,' he continues.

He hasn't lived in the castle for 30 years, and confesses, 'I've long since not missed calling it home. It was a magical place to grow up... but now it's been so different for so long.

'We are there if they [the foundation. His grandmother wanted the castle to be run by a foundation after her death so it could be enjoyed by the public] want to get in touch and it's always a really nice thing when they do, but the castle is run by the trustees. It's nothing essentially to do with us any more.

'I love to go back, and my wife and I go back whenever we can.'

Anthony's book, *Outrageous Fortune: Growing Up At Leeds Castle*, is full of memorable tales of his childhood and the relatives who lived there. But what are his fondest memories? 'My grandmother, Lady Baillie, had a certain way of doing things. Her duck launching is certainly the favourite tale for many people. She would go off abroad to get some wild and special birds, and on the way home, the airline wanted to put them in the hold. She said, "No way, they are coming on the plane with me."

'They had to make a few calls but they ended up sitting in first class on the plane with her - they had the seats in front removed. Magnificent.

'Extraordinarily, it was Edwardian, almost, at times. Black tie every evening, long dress for the ladies every evening. Absolutely magnificent... they certainly go on, the tales from Leeds.' ■

◆ *Outrageous Fortune: Growing Up At Leeds Castle* by Anthony Russell (The Robson Press, £20).

◆ Leeds Castle: 01622-765400, www.leeds-castle.com

OTHER CASTLES TO VISIT

CARDIFF CASTLE

With more than 2,000 years of history, there is plenty to explore. Events are held in the grounds throughout the year.

◆ 029-2087 8100, www.cardiffcastle.com

DUNSTANBURGH CASTLE

Once one of the largest fortifications in the North, this spectacular ruin can only be reached on foot, but is well worth the walk.

◆ 01665-576231, www.nationaltrust.org.uk/dunstanburgh-castle

EILEAN DONAN CASTLE

This remote castle has had a leading role in blockbusters such as *Highlander* and James Bond's *The World Is Not Enough*. Situated where three lochs meet, the castle enjoys majestic scenery.

◆ 01599-555202, www.eileandonancastle.com

THORNBURY CASTLE

You can spend the night at this Tudor castle, dating from 1511 and located on the edge of the Cotswolds, where Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn once walked.

◆ 01454-281182, www.thornburycastle.co.uk

WARWICK CASTLE

There is plenty going on at the castle but be sure to check out the medieval glamping. Stay in one of the medieval-style tents and spend the evening like a real knight.

◆ 01926-495421, www.warwick-castle.com



Anthony Russell and his wife, Catherine