

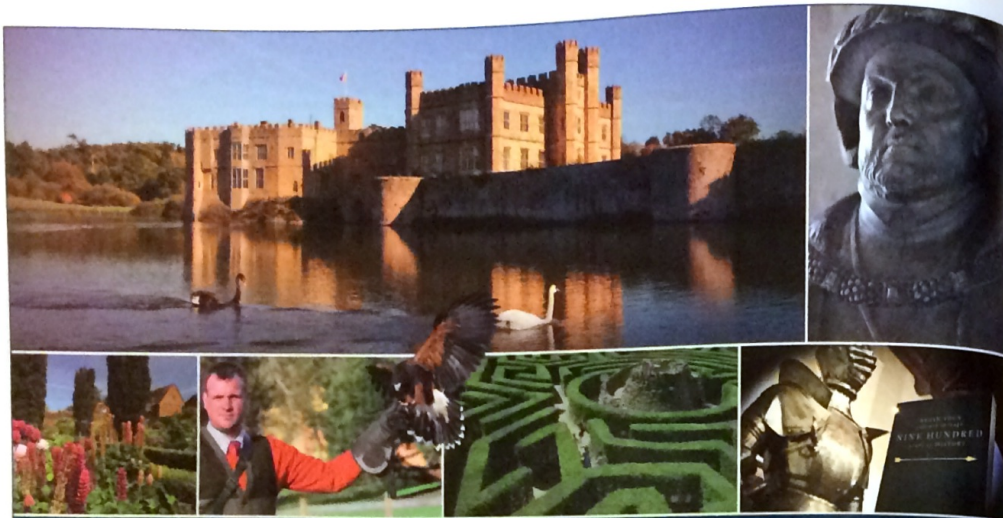
MY CHILDHOOD *in a castle*

What child doesn't long to be king of their very own castle? Anthony Russell got to live out this childhood dream at Leeds Castle, in Kent. Here he tells us about life growing up there in the 1950s

WORDS ANTHONY RUSSELL AND JOSEPHINE PRICE

12th-century Leeds Castle in Kent is known as 'the loveliest castle in the world'





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When I went to school I started to realise that not everybody lived in a castle



Clockwise, from above: Anthony Russell at Leeds Castle; the Russell brothers play in the castle grounds; the library, designed by Stéphane Boudin

Historian Lord Conway once described Leeds Castle as the 'loveliest castle in the world' and this opulent one-time home formed the backdrop for the Honourable Anthony Russell's childhood. His grandmother, Lady Olive Baillie, was the last private owner of the castle and was responsible for its elegant transformation, before bequeathing it to a trust upon her death in 1974. Her youngest grandson, Anthony, spent much of his childhood here, where he learnt that life in a castle was quite different to that of his schoolfriends:

"My first memory of Leeds Castle was from the pram as Nanny took me on one of our daily walks. Obviously the memory is a little hazy but that was how I started to get a vague inclination of this amazing place. The pictures got clearer as I got older when I began exploring the nooks and crannies of the estate on my bicycle, and became more and more fond of the estate I was lucky enough to grow up in.

There was something really special about it and yet it seemed very normal, as I didn't know where other people lived. When I went to school (Hill House in London first, and then Stowe in Buckinghamshire), I started to realise that not everybody lived in a castle.

My favourite room in the castle was the library. The room was very large, square, and designed by Stéphane Boudin, a famous French interior designer from the 1930s to the 1960s; he was also responsible for decorating The White House for the Kennedys. He and my grandmother spent about 30 years working together on the castle, and I thought what they did in the library was beautiful. Bookshelves covered two and a half of the walls and there was a table in the centre, which divided the room, with the sofa in front of the mantelpiece. Above it was a wonderful painting of my grandmother, my aunt and my mother by the French artist Etienne Drian, which still hangs in the castle today. It was a grand, yet cosy room where you could curl up in one of the sofas that lined the outside of

the room or in one of the armchairs by the fireplace. If you were interested in the history of those who had stayed there then you could go through the visitors' book that sat on an oak table in the middle of the room. There you saw some important names: the Queen and Queen Mother, European royalty, Hollywood movies stars and lots of cabinet ministers.

However, the folks who struck me as being really interesting were the ones who came at weekends: my grandmother's best friends, the British Conservative politicians Lord David Margesson (Morg) and Lord Geoffrey-Lloyd. They were very impressive men indeed. Morg, in particular, was the absolute master of how to



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be kind to a little person who is perhaps, you might say, just a little bit out of his depth in his surroundings. I was very shy and I was mostly kept away from the grown ups with Nanny, so when I was around them I just didn't know where to look quite a bit of the time.

My first funny encounter with adults in the castle was when I was five. Just as Nanny and I were going out a woman arrived at the castle door. I didn't know who she was and thought 'oh no what a dreadful-looking person.' I screamed at her: "Get out, get out, before I kick you out." I later learnt that she was Princess Djordjadze, an English lady who had married movie stars and a couple of titled Englishmen before she married Prince Djordjadze of Russia. And there was little me, aged five, behaving in a way that nobody could believe. That incident went down in castle folklore as one of the funniest things that anyone had ever heard. Later on I realised why everyone thought it was funny, but at the time I just thought, 'this is my castle and I don't want you inside it'.

When my brothers were around it was great fun. We used to roam the estate on our bicycles like complete lunatics. There was so much to do at the castle it was extraordinary: there was a squash court, a private golf course, tennis courts and a croquet lawn in front of the castle. There was shooting during the winter and we had go-karts. My uncle Gawaine was a very accomplished racing driver and together we learnt how to drive up and down the front and back drive. You can imagine the space we had to have fun with those machines.

There was nobody on the golf course most of the time so we could drive at high speed all around it, especially over the big dip on the 7th hole by the moat, which was created during the Second World War when a German plane was shot down and crashed, very narrowly missing the castle. That must have been something to behold. Not many children were blessed to have so many extraordinary things to do in such a beautiful environment. Did I realise we were incredibly spoilt? Not really. Not until people started to mention how lucky we were.

I got on very well with the staff in the castle. I saw Mrs Walsh the housekeeper in the mornings, when she would generally be discreetly organising things around the castle. I never saw the maids that worked for her, which was strange. They seemed to do their work and miraculously



Top to bottom: Leeds Castle golf course; Anthony Russell's mother, aunt and sister present the 'key to the castle' to Queen Elizabeth II on her visit in 1981

disappear. My favourite staff member was Borrett, the butler. He was so kind and distinguished in every way, from his looks to his manners. He always brought me my Coca Cola in a glass with ice and lemon on a silver tray and called me Master Anthony until I was 13 when he started to call me Mr Anthony – the best thing ever because I was then on the same level as my brothers.

Life in the castle was one of extreme comfort where everything was done for you – not the best training in life. I call it the 'luxury brew' of which I imbibed copiously. As I got older, I became aware that this wouldn't always exist. Though I wish I had never moved out, I will always be grateful for my experiences as a young fellow. Going back there will always be special to me no matter what." ■

OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE



Read the full story of life at Leeds Castle in Anthony Russell's book *Outrageous Fortune: Growing up at Leeds Castle* (see review, page 24) and turn the page for more information on being the king (or queen) of your very own castle, at least for one night.

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