

Ruined castle enjoys online restoration

THE centrepiece of Wales' near £6bn tourism industry, they have captivated generations of visitors as fascinating relics of the nation's past.

But while the castles built as Edward I's network of fortresses might trip off the tongue with ease, Wales is home to a plethora of lesser known strongholds boasting almost equally rich histories.

Among these largely forgotten relics is Wrexham's Holt Castle.

With no lucrative army of tourists descending annually, until recently the cash and will to maintain it has been limited.

But funded by charity the Castle Studies Trust, experts Rick Turner and Chris Jones-Jenkins have completed a digital restoration of the fortress to raise its profile.

Converted into a video fly-through, the online restoration shows what the castle was like at its zenith in the late 15th century.

Thanks to their efforts, the online version of the relic now looks as formidable a fortress as almost any in Wales but little remains above ground of the physical structure that was once a favourite of Richard II's.

Towards the end of his reign, it became Richard's royal treasury, storing an estimated £66,000 before his downfall.

The end came two centuries after its peak when it was systematically stripped of stone to help build the Duke of Westminster's country house Eaton Hall, in nearby Cheshire.

Mr Turner still recalls how he first stumbled across Holt's ruins.

For him, the digital restoration marks the culmination of a link to the castle going back three decades.

While working as a county archaeologist in Cheshire, a group of divers discovered a barge laden with stone at the bottom of the River Dee. The barge was discovered on the Cheshire side of the river 30 years ago.

PhD student Mr Turner, 63, went to meet the team with wife Helen and baby daughter Alice.

The moment has both a personal and professional resonance - it was the first time the couple had ventured out with Alice.

The stone found on the barge was among that robbed from Holt.

Mr Turner said: "You could see the ruins of the castle across the river. That was the first time I think I had any association with Holt Castle. I went there subsequently to have a look around. All of this has been in my mind for a long time."

The historians used inventories, antiquarian drawings and

Robbed of stone to build the Duke of Westminster's country house Eaton Hall in the 17th century, little remains of the Edwardian castle of Holt. But now two experts have turned detective to produce a digital restoration of the ruin that was a favourite of Richard II. Darren Devine reports



► Holt Castle as it looks now, top, and, above, the digital restoration which has been completed to show what the castle was like in the 15th century

plans as well as the results of recent excavations to complete their online restoration.

Mr Turner added: "It has been great fun trying to solve the disappearance of this once famous castle. All the different pieces of evidence have had to be assessed and reconciled.

"The most important is what survives at the crime scene itself, the visible remains and what has been found in recent excavations.

"Old plans and views have been helpful in rebuilding the lost parts, though at times the information they give is contradictory.

"Visualising what the documentary sources are describing has been a real challenge.

"We hope that we have done this impressive and complex castle justice."

It is thought the castle was built in the late 13th century by John de Warenne, sixth earl of Surrey. He was granted the land in 1282 by Edward I and it was a revolutionary design for an Edwardian castle.

It has played an important role from the 13th century through to its destruction several centuries after Richard II's fall.

The castle has had a number of famous visitors (Edward the Black Prince, and Henry VII).

It was once owned by Sir William Stanley, who was a key player in the victory of Henry VII over Richard III.

The castle was reopened to the

public in June following a £143,000 four-year restoration.

Wrexham's Heritage Service carried out archaeological excavations, conserved the castle's masonry and installed stairs with Welsh government and European funding.

Castle Studies Trust co-patron John Goodall said the project helped reconstruct the splendour of a major castle lost for nearly 400 years.

He added: "The video fly-through will not only help people understand what this unusual and sophisticated building looked like, but also how it would have functioned as a working building, something that is impossible in its current condition."



MATTER OF FACT RACHAEL MISSTEAR

WHAT a lovely feeling, the countdown to the holiday.

Yes, you've still got a stifling workload, and a "to do" list as long as your arm, washing to do, hoovering to avoid and that pressing letter that needs to be sent to the council's parking department, but somehow all of these things are made infinitely more achievable by the prospect of boarding a flight to costa del escapism, if only for a few days.

The thought of drinking a glass of wine at sundown, with the waves lapping the shore, the heavenly evening breeze, warmer than a cuddle - it's like a great spoon of sugar to ease life's daily woes.

All that's required yet is to pack - the shorts, the bikinis, the suntan lotion, a few books and the euros. The euros?

Dear God, will it still be this currency?

Speaking to friends this week about their planned Greek island adventure, I see the delightful build-up to the pre-holiday has been marred by a consideration far greater than how many evening dresses to pack or whether to hire a car.

Suddenly, rather than making colleagues jealous by giving online updates of the forecasted halcyon awaiting them across the Mediterranean, they are scanning the news for updates about the Greek crisis.

Everyone knows they have to save a little extra to spend on their summer break, but what if that money can't be accessed because the banks have folded?

It's not the usual holiday checklist one expects to have to tick.

Despite roundly voting "No" last Sunday to accepting tough austerity terms for a bailout that expired June 30, Greeks are alarmed at capital controls that have closed banks and rationed cash at ATMs for nearly two weeks.

With warnings that locals can only withdraw €60, the imagination conjures vivid scenarios where anxious pasty Brits have notes stuffed inside their swimmers so as not to get caught short.

And as the time rolls on, and even the faces on the passports seem to be showing the strain, there's talk of a "temporary Grexit" - Greece leaving the Eurozone as a temporary measure. This is cold comfort for the Greek people or the thousands of sun-expectant Brits who help boost the economy.

It's not often you find your breakfast banter, as you hoick the children into their school trousers, is about anything more taxing than the dreadful parking at school, dinner money payments or the homework you nearly forget to sign.

Suddenly you're talking Euro leaders, Brussels and "make-or-break" summits.

So as the usually breezy days roll on, without so much as a mention of "will we need air conditioning?", the holiday prep becomes a daily analysis of foreign monetary politics.

The only bail-out most holidaymakers wanted to be thinking about was that of their sinking lilo.

rachael.misstear@walesonline.co.uk