

Castles and Characters

by Terence Baker

Several years ago driving along the back roads of Mississippi, I realized traveling was not just a matter of going from place to place, but also a matter of going from character to character. In the Magnolia State, I met the King of Rock n' Roll, Elvis Presley, in Tupelo; writer William Faulkner in Oxford; bluesman Robert Johnson in Clarksdale; and, best of all, the Reverend H.D. Dennis, who built a yellow, red and white roadside shrine to God known as the Home of the Double-Headed Eagle, just outside of Vicksburg that doubles as a shop, Margaret's Grocery.

So, I knew I'd be on firm territory when recently I went castle-hopping in North England. All I had to do, I surmised, was to look and listen, so as to uncover a wealth of personality that would add to the countryside's scenic beauty.

My first stop was Muncaster Castle, in the county of Cumbria. Immediately, I heard tales of 16th-century Thomas Skelton, aka Tom Fool, who gave us the word "tomfoolery." Locals advise visitors not to annoy his ghost, who remains as unpleasant "dead" as he was alive, or indeed the current jester, one being appointed annually. The current residents, the Frost-Penningtons, wisely listened, the land having been with their family since 1208. Portraits of ancestors grimly guard the "Luck of Muncaster," a glass bowl carried by the fleeing Henry VI in 1464 during the War of the Roses. It is treated reverently. If it breaks, the Penningtons will "no longer thrive."

In the beautiful Eden Valley in the same county, I came across Lady Anne Clifford, a brave woman who defied King James I and challenged the sexist inheritance laws of her age to reclaim her ancestral castles: Appleby, Brough (pronounced "brow" and the subject of the photo above) and Brougham (pronounced, just to confuse things even more, "broom"). I visited a group of almshouses

she built in which still live only women and St. Ninian's Church, which dates back to Norman times but also was rebuilt by Lady Clifford and sits alone at the end of a mile-long country walk.

Actors Jeremy Irons and Anthony Andrews made appearances in my cast of characters at Castle Howard in Yorkshire. One of England's



most popular attractions, it was here that Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited* was adapted for television. I strolled through majestic grounds and gardens, across bridges and up to the mausoleum accompanied by the ghosts of 10 generations of the noble Howard family, including Belted Will, whose father, the 4th Duke of Norfolk, was beheaded for being too close to Mary, Queen of Scots.

I was due to meet a living duchess. In the county of Northumberland, I had an appointment with the Duchess of Northumberland at her home of Alnwick (pronounced "Ann-nick") Castle, but as I sat sipping tea I was politely told that she "sends her

profound apologies, but her private plane is delayed coming from (the Indian Ocean island of) Mauritius." Oh, the troubles of the rich and famous! To cheer myself up, I visited her Poison Garden, behind an imposing gate with a skull and crossbones. Above, I imagined Harry Potter playing quidditch, the scenes of which were filmed here.

Not every character has a name, I discovered. In many castles, such as Ripley, I uncovered priest holes, where stoic Catholic priests hid in stuffy nooks from their Protestant tormentors. Farther north, I delighted in stories of the Border Reivers, cattle rustlers from the 13th and 14th centuries, who made so many enemies and conducted so many internecine feuds that their first act every morning, so legends go, was to touch their throats to make sure they had not been slit.

On the holy island of Lindisfarne, to the east of England, 10 miles or so from Scotland and less than 200 miles from my adventure's beginnings, I met author-monk The Venerable Bede, who wrote *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. He lived here in the 7th century in a priory founded by St. Cuthbert, whom he served under. They all lived under the constant threat of another group of less-savory characters:

Vikings, who mysteriously appeared through deep mist, swords raised. Lindisfarne has a 16th-century castle, close to which, wedged behind a stone wall, is a small garden designed by Gertrude Jekyll, who also laid out the garden at Glebe House in Woodbury, Conn.

The wind on this bleak but beautiful spot did its best to create the maelstrom that all the characters I met on my journey had suffered or created, but this garden was surviving, and I was impressed that from such rocky soil, fair flowers flourished. Long may the personalities, too.

Terence Baker is the travel editor of this magazine.