INVENTED TRADITIONS – THE CASE OF THE PERCY FAMILY



Alnwick Castle, Scottish borders – Northumberland UK – home of Harry Potter

As I prepare for a month of fieldwork along Hadrian's Wall in the UK and north into Walter Scott country, never mind the rock art and superbly preserved agricultural landscapes, I came across a new attraction at Alnwick Castle, the fabulous medieval border stronghold owned by the Duke and Duchess of Northumberland.

There's a 75 million dollar project underway to create a walled garden in the grand style, with massive cascade, labyrinth, 65,000 plants, and now, the biggest treehouse in the world!



Swiss Family Robinson meets Hogwarts

The garden is quite spectacular – I have visited with friends a couple of years ago. It now gets half a million visitors a year. The castle is regularly used as a film location – Harry Potter learned to fly his broomstick in the outer bailey doubling as the grounds of Hogwarts. Fun stuff.

As might be expected the whole Alnwick project is presented as a great thing for local tourism and the economic health of the region. The garden is a charitable trust, patron Prince Charles, and has received significant public subsidy.

The castle itself is presented to the visitor as a family home – photos of the kids alongside Turner's gorgeous painting of the temple of Aegina.



Canaletto's Alnwick – before (!) the Gothic remodelling

Am I too grumpy to be very suspicious of all this? Too much a republican for sure – I have an instinctive aversion to the European aristocracy.

Marion Shoard, in her classic book 'This Land is Our Land'€, targeted criticism against the vast Alnwick estate, Hulne Park, as one of the largest tracts of land in England kept for purely private pleasure, in spite of public rights of way. She points out that 20% of land in the UK is still in the hands of the families who arrived with William of Normandy in the eleventh century and took all by right of conquest.

Since then the aristocracy have regularly re-invented themselves. The British monarchy have become a media side show, of course.

Here is Richard Davenport Hines on Alnwick and the Percy family (from his book ‘Gothic’€, page 83 and after) –

A more flippant border fortress than the Brampton Bryan project is the Northumbrian Castle at Alnwick. This had been owned continuously by the Percy family since William de Percy came to England as part of the Norman conquest before dying on the First Crusade in 1096. A descendant was summoned to Parliament as a baron in 1299, and the fourth baron was created Earl of Northumberland at the coronation of King Richard II in 1377. This earl’s son, Harry Percy, nicknamed Hotspur, was a great military commander whose exploits were celebrated by Shakespeare in King Henry the Fourth, Part One. The male line of the family became extinct in 1670. The last earl’s heiress married the sixth Duke of Somerset, known as the Proud Duke. He was so inflated with rank and genealogy … that he insisted that his children always stand in his presence, and disinherited a daughter whom he discovered to have sat while he was asleep. The Proud Duke’s granddaughter married in 1740 Sir Hugh Smithson, a Yorkshire baronet, whose family had been ennobled as recently as 1660 on the basis of money originating from a haberdasher’s shop in Cheapside. Four years later her brother’s unexpected

death transformed her into a great heiress. In 1749 the ancient Northumberland Earldom was revived for her father, with a special remainder so that it passed on his death in 1750 to Smithson, who took the name of Percy. In 1753 the reinvented Smithson became Lord-Lieutenant of Northumberland, and afterwards of Middlesex too; having been Viceroy of Ireland in 1763-65, he was created Duke of Northumberland in 1766.

…

The pretensions of these new Northumberlands as authentic Percys were much mocked. ‘That great vulgar Countess has been laid up with a hurt on her leg’, Horace Walpole gossiped in 1759: ‘The Duchess of Grafton asked if it were true that Lady Rebecca Poulett kicked her? – ‘Kicked me madam! When did you ever hear of a Percy that took a kick?’ … Lord March making them a visit this summer at Alnwick Castle, my Lord received him at the gate, and said, ‘I believe, my Lord, this is the first time that ever a Douglas and a Percy met here in friendship’ – think of this from a Smithson to a true Douglas.’

The building of Northumberland Avenue connecting

Whitehall to the Thames led to her being teased in some newspapers as the ‘Duchess of Charing Cross’

The new Northumberlands began restoring their medieval properties soon after acquiring them – the grounds were landscaped by local Capability Brown and the town improved with fine stone houses and market, a gothic bridge and a lion atop a column.

The castle itself was decked out in gothic style with Robert Adam interiors.

Lady Holland in 1798 reported

‘Alnwick, on the outside, revives the recollection of all one has heard of baronial splendour, battlements, towers, gateways, portcullis, etc., immense courts, thick walls, and everything demonstrative of savage solitary, brutal power and magnitude. The late Duchess built the present fabric upon the site of the primitive castle, but much is from a traditional guess. The inside corresponds but feebly with the outward promise; the whole is fitted up in a tinsel, gingerbread taste rether adapted to a theatrical representation.’

The interiors were redone at a cost of £250k by the fourth Duke after 1854 – more accurately medieval, supposedly.

The British aristocracy have always loved building projects.

This is the latest in turning power into entertainment.