

Eleanor of Castile and Leeds Castle

In large measure this short article is designed to answer the questions: Why was a princess by birth and a Queen of England by marriage actively interesting herself in buying, running and renovating Leeds Castle? And how can her influence still be perceived¹?

Eleanor's Castilian background

The starting point for Eleanor's interest in property, and hence in Leeds Castle is to be found in the fact that Eleanor came from Castile.

Castile was, of course a successor kingdom to the Roman province of Hispania, from whence came the Emperors Trajan and Theodosius. Since the weakening of the Roman Empire the Visigoths had established a kingdom in Hispania. But in the C8 waves of Islamic invaders swept into this kingdom and very nearly swept right off the peninsula. The shattered remnants of the nobles of the kingdom holed up behind the wall of the Cantabrian mountains in the north, calling themselves the Kingdom of the Asturias.

Within a few years a new county and later a new kingdom developed in the eastern march of this area - protected by big brutal castles. These castles gave it its name - Castile - and were to form the national badge of the country; of which its citizens, including Eleanor, were very proud, wearing it and working it repeatedly into decoration for example as it is scattered hundreds of times over Eleanor's tomb.

Meanwhile to the south there flourished the enlightened Caliphate of Cordoba, peopled by patrons of learning who transformed the part of the peninsula they inhabited, with advanced agriculture, and huge sophisticated towns - and seventeen universities (there were two universities elsewhere in Europe)

So when the Reconquista commenced and the Visigothic nobles started to push south reclaiming territory which had been occupied they found a world considerably superior to their own in terms of learning and sophistication. This was illustrated particularly upon the conquest of Toledo, one of the primary cities of the former Caliphate and later those of Cordoba and Seville. It was described by an Andalusian poet as a city of pleasures, surpassing in beauty the most extravagant description. It had orchards gardens groves of fruit (pomegranates in particular) and fields of saffron. And it had unbelievable learning - it was a centre of excellence for medicine, architecture agronomy astrology and mathematics amongst others. They introduced for example the sine and tangent functions into the thinking of the West.

This discovery produced a number of knock on effects in Castilian society which are significant as far as Eleanor is concerned.

The first is that learning was key. The Christian reconquerors found massive libraries to which academics flocked and which gave life to the great thoughts of scholars such as Maimonides and they determined to make themselves worthy of this inheritance. So

¹ Save where otherwise indicated the material in this article derives from "Eleanor of Castile, The Shadow Queen"

investment in learning continued with scholars being paid to translate inherited documents from Latin and Arabic into the local vernacular. Critically – this was an endeavour which went to the top and engaged the personal interest and participation of the royals, unlike in England and France where scholarship was the business of the middle classes. Thus both Eleanor’s father Ferdinand III and her brother Alfonso X figure as authors.

What is more Ferdinand plainly ensured his children received the best education available. He commissioned didactic works for them – including a book called *The Book of the Twelve Wise Men* – which included stories taken from Islamic traditions – a clear example of the Castilians piggybacking the learning of Islam. And Alfonso became an intellectual prodigy, writing books of laws, books about chess, books about games, books about military tactics and management, and poems which he had set to music – the famous *Cantigas de Santa Maria*

At least two of Ferdinand’s sons went to the foremost university of the time – Paris - where Thomas Aquinas taught. One of these sons, Enrique, was a talented poet, who wrote a landmark chivalric romance, *Amadis de Gaula*. And it seems clear that Eleanor did not miss out on this sort of education. Alfonso - who took charge of Eleanor’s education when she was ten, he wrote at great length about the importance of good teaching for princes – and critically princesses; his view was that both should be educated to the highest standard

The second knock on effect was that the Castilian royal family were brought up amongst much more sophisticated architecture and facilities than was at all usual elsewhere. Despite the military origins of Castile, the royals became the inheritors of true palaces with three key features

The first – running water. Because of the relative lack of water in their home countries the invaders had developed advanced irrigation systems for farming, which could then be turned into facilities for use and decoration and pleasure. Thus while London had two conduits – and that was deemed pretty good - the Almohad towns had hundreds of Public Baths (figures range from 300 to 900 in Cordoba, and presumably similar numbers in Toledo and Seville). And of course there was running water and beautiful baths in the palaces including large quasi swimming baths featured in the harems.

Running water was also a feature of the second stand out features – the gardens. These were known as paradises – and sound as if they well deserved the name. Think of shady sunken gardens thick with the perfume of fruits and flowers, surrounded by painted or carved walls. Above these lower gardens are sunny upper walkways edged with flowing streams of crystal clear water running towards the centre of the garden where a fountain plays. The design is intended to echo the supposed four rivers of Eden, and the orderly structure and planting bring peace and harmony to the soul of the viewer. This was one type of garden which was common in Castile – the courtyard with a central pool. The other favoured type, where space permitted, was what was known as the Pavilion on pool type. Here a part of the palace, or a summer house or gazebo was placed in the centre of a large pool. One garden even featured a pavilion of coloured glass embellished with gold on an island within a pool in the garden.

The final key feature of these palaces is that they were thick with items of beauty – vibrantly coloured or beautifully decorated bowls, carved screens, jewel coloured tiles and rich textiles which were used far more liberally than was common in England

So overall Castilian life was not just more full of learning, it was also far more full of a consciousness of and a striving to surround yourself with beauty. Eleanor would therefore subconsciously expect loveliness in all her surroundings in a palace and its grounds

The third knock on effect of the Reconquest the third of these was rather more serious. The experience of the reconquest made sure that the Castilians interacted more closely with the Jewish population than was common in Western Europe. Jewish scholars had flourished under the Almohads – and continued to do so. Jewish businessmen had done very well in Toledo under the Almohads – and were still allowed to do so. Generally the reconquest required business to work well – funds needed to be supplied for fighting, and new territories had to be made to generate revenue, not ground into the ground.

The Jewish population of Castile had been integral in helping this to happen. For this reason Eleanor's father had fought their corner – supported by his own most senior cardinal, who petitioned the Pope on their behalf. Jewish businessmen appeared at court, ran the finances of Catholic orders and were incentivised to develop new territories. Jewish businessmen were completely immersed in the tax collection functions of the state. Jewish doctors consulted at court – Eleanor's own mother retained a Jewish doctor

Consequently where an English princess would see would never expect to have contact with, still less do any business with Jewish businessmen, Eleanor saw them as people who could be key figures in business.

There was another aspect of the Castilian mindset which is very significant indeed when it comes to considering Eleanor's involvement with Leeds Castle - the Castilian attitude to landholding and management by women. Of course it is fairly well known that the view often expressed that generally women in the medieval period were thoroughly ground down and subject to male authority in property matters is quite a long way from the truth. In reality across Europe women in the early medieval period had fairly good rights as regards property.

But the surviving records do suggest that in Northern and Western Europe from about the time of Eleanor of Aquitaine those rights had been fairly seriously eroded and by Eleanor's day a French or English Queen was substantially reliant on her husband for financial support. She was not expected to have anything to do with the business of running properties until she was widowed, at which point she would enter into such properties as she was granted by way of dower (ie gift from husband's family to wife).

In Castile, again, things were rather different. There the tradition of an active dower on marriage continued to exist, so on marriage, properties given in dower were actually transferred to the wife and become hers to manage. What is more, in Castile they had even had a very active Queen regnant – Urraca of Castile, de jure Empress of All the Spains and Galicia, and Eleanor's own grandmother Berengaria "the Great" would have been Queen of Castile, had she not abdicated in favour of her son. Berengaria may indeed be held up as a classic example of the Castilian approach to dower. On her marriage to her loathed cousin Alfonso IX of Leon, her dower was key border forts which he was using to harass the Castilians. Berengaria proceeded to take possession of those forts – and hold them against her husband.

So Eleanor came from a background where she would expect to hold land and manage it herself – a very different mindset to that of an English princess. And of course, even on the maternal side Eleanor came from a line of Countesses, who might have been subject to their husbands, but were the de jure lords of a whole county. Her maternal grandmother Marie of Ponthieu appears to have negotiated her own reconciliation with the French crown when her husband's family rebelled and Eleanor's mother Jeanne ruled the county in her own right for some years before her second marriage. She also managed to fall out with her step son Alfonso over her property rights in Castile

Eleanor the property developer

This brings us to the story of Eleanor's own property holding, and how Leeds fits into that. The context is that Eleanor came to England with no property. She was totally financially dependent on Edward – who was himself always short of money. But from shortly after she bore her first living child, in the early 1260s, Eleanor began to be given properties in her own right

And from the mid-1260s we can see her actually becoming personally involved in acquiring them. There is a classic letter from just after the Barons' War, plainly dictated (if not written) by Eleanor herself, giving instructions about potential properties which her agents are to try to acquire from the King. This shows direct instructions from Eleanor, evidence of an understanding by her of the personalities involved in the land division business post the Barons' War, evidence of an understanding by her of theories of effective property management, thorough research of lands likely to be on the market and sensitivity about how her land dealings will be perceived. In short we can see from an early stage a very hands on and businesslike approach

At the same time Eleanor had begun to acquire Jewish debts. This was something that some magnates shied away from because it was disapproved by the Franciscan wing of the church as "being concerned in usury", but which Eleanor embraced without concern, bolstered by a rather more businesslike approach on the part of her favoured Order, the Dominicans, who considered reasonable interest to be permissible. The extent of her ease with this sort of business can be seen in the fact that she had also had developed a relationship with at least one Jewish businessman – Benedict de Wintonia – which caused her to actually intercede for him with the King.

By the time Eleanor returned home from crusade in 1274 she was starting to work at a revised (larger) dower assignment – we know this from the fact that she made sure her brother raised the need for this formally with Edward when they were near Castile on the way back. Furthermore between her arrival back and the assignment of the dower in October 1275 one can see her touring the country inspecting properties for the dower, and properties which can be acquired by her as the years roll by. This would become a landed estate which an earl would consider made him rich.

It was quite simply a staggering achievement and Eleanor's personal fingerprints are all over it. Letters can be seen tipping her off about properties which are just coming on the market. Letters can be seen to her from bailiffs apologising for losing key documents.

Orders go out from her in a stream utilising a large fleet of famously speedy couriers - even when she is ill, and right up to the last days of her life.

Eleanor's acquisition of Leeds Castle

When it comes to Eleanor and Leeds itself the timeline is fascinating.

The new King and Queen arrived back in England on 2 August 1274, following a stay with her mother in Ponthieu. Eleanor, by the by, had had a baby in late November 1273 - at least her ninth. By April she was travelling the 500 miles north towards the Pas de Calais on horseback. By the time she arrived there in July she was probably approaching the end of her first trimester of her tenth pregnancy - ie. she travelled right through the first months. She then crossed the Channel and after a day or so rode 20 miles to Canterbury.

Following a visit to Canterbury between 5 and 7 August, the royal couple are recorded in Tonbridge on 10th. We do not know for a fact where they were on the blank days. But if you plot the journey between Canterbury and Tonbridge (the castle of Earl Warenne) what do you find? - a distance of 43.3 miles. Edward and Eleanor liked to average about 20 miles a day, so they may only have stopped at one place in that time. And what is almost directly en route between the two recorded stops? Leeds Castle. There is therefore a very real possibility that Leeds was their stopover between Canterbury and Tonbridge.

On that stop, what would they have found and learned?

The archaeologist and historian Colin Flight has unpicked the story of the House of Crevequer up to this point². The barony of Leeds had been in the possession of the Crevequer family since the 11th century. In the 1260s the properties held were Leeds, Chatham, West Farleigh, Bockingfold and Teston. But by this time the family had come under financial strain.

The exact reasons why are unclear, but it seems that when Robert Crevequer inherited there were at least two widows to provide for (his mother and his grandfather's third wife), - probably accounting for life shares in two third of the property, plus two uncles and various cousins and at least one byblow - a certain Thomas de Crevequer. What is more, young Robert had been just the age to be enchanted by Simon de Montfort and so he backed the baronial cause in the Barons' War, and his property was seized by Henry III. He then had to buy back his land from government and his obdurate enemy Roger de Leyburn (a close associate of Edward I) who had acquired it from the Crown.

The result was that the barony was divided: he kept Chatham, and the Leyburns kept Leeds. It is therefore unsurprising that we find that Robert contracted considerable debts to Jewish moneylenders.

How do we know this? Simple. In Michaelmas term 1275 Eleanor acquired the debts owed by Robert to one Maser son of Aaron of London and others to Hagin son of Moses (a debt of over £300 - a very substantial sum)³, a piece of business which strongly suggests that Eleanor had already begun to interest herself in Leeds.

² The Fall of the House of Crevequer

<http://www.kentarchaeology.ac/digiarchive/ColinFlight/crevequer-fall.pdf>

³ CPEJ, iii, 78-9, Parsons p 176

Returning to the royal visit of 1274, the holding of the Castle by the Leyburn family was another reason why Edward and Eleanor would be likely to be there in 1274. Roger, their friend, had died on service in Gascony while they were away, and his lands had been inherited by his young son William. What was more natural than to stop and pay their respects?

Now William de Leyburn, too, had financial problems, which Edward and Eleanor will have heard about from him on their visit. On 13 November 1275 – very close in time to the Crevequer grant – Edward granted Eleanor all debts owed to the Jewry by William de Leyburn⁴.

It is therefore very likely indeed that there was a visit in August 1274 and that this provided the occasion for Eleanor's falling for the location as well as for learning of the Crevequer problems, which were so enmeshed with William Leyburn's.

So one can see that even in 1275 Eleanor was taking steps to reunite the tattered fragments of the Crevequer barony in her own capable hands – acquiring the debts of both Leyburn and Crevequer. This came to fruition in the middle of 1278, when Eleanor acquired⁵ West Farleigh from Roger Loveday, who had held it from a member of the Crevequer family, Chatham and Bockingfold from Robert de Crevequer, some outlying lands from Thomas de Crevequer and Leeds Castle from William de Leyburn.

One important point should be noted. These are not (as has sometimes been suggested) foreclosures or hostile takeovers. They are largely beneficial moves for two men hopelessly mired in debt. William de Leyburn was pardoned all his debts to the Jewry and given £500 up front with £400 paid later. Robert de Crevequer was pardoned his debts to the Jewry a little later, and granted lands in the Welsh Marshes⁶. He went on to serve Eleanor as a household knight, and do good service in the next Welsh War. Although the lands he held were shifted about somewhat, he received an income of £85 a year throughout his life⁷.

Eleanor's development of Leeds Castle

Having got the castle, Eleanor immediately set to work to improve it, and we can imagine it was in no very good state of repair following the difficult decade or so which had preceded her acquisition. As it stood, it was essentially a stone donjon castle on an island created by partially damming the River Len – and we know little more about it than that.

Under Eleanor's direction this castle became a residential palace, known as the Gloriette. This is not (contrary to some reports) a specifically Castilian term, but probably a term used at the time for the most luxurious, light and airy apartments in some castles – derived from the word gloria meaning halo of light; though another rather attractive theory links the word Gloriette to the meaning of the name of the Sicilian palace of La Ziza (meaning "The Splendid") which Eleanor and Edward had visited en route to and from crusade – and that

⁴ Parsons p 128

⁵ Parsons 176 details the acquisitions

⁶ Parsons 134-5

⁷ Flight p 8

derivation would account for it being used here, and at Hesdin, designed by Robert of Artois⁸.

The Gloriette was a mini palace: it boasted a Great Hall and spacious rooms for the king and queen. Another interesting feature is the central courtyard of the Gloriette, now known as the Fountain Court, which features a central fountain supplied by fourteenth century piping from springs in the park. This raises the question what water feature was included earlier. We don't know, but it is certainly tempting to imagine that Eleanor, who had a great fondness for water features in her gardens, had at least a pool included in the 1280s works on this courtyard (as she did, for example at Rhuddlan Castle and at Westminster (an oriel window overlooking "the Queen's pool") if not a fountain. This would reflect the "courtyard with a central pool" design familiar to her from childhood.

We should seriously consider the possibility that the fountain which now gives the courtyard its name was always a part of Eleanor's plan but left unexecuted at her death. Spencer Gavin Smith⁹ is currently turning up a number of design features in the gardens of the Welsh palaces which appear to have been influenced by Eleanor, but which did not get to the top of the to do list until years after her death - including a water feature at Caernarfon.

There is also the famous King's Bath House - traceable from Eleanor's final account book. It is apparent that she created here the unheard of luxury of a tiled and probably piped bathroom with a bath big enough to swim in. This feature was almost certainly Eleanor's idea - since innovative uses of water - and indeed luxurious arrangements for bathing - were much in vogue in Castile.

Nor were these the only Castilian water themed influences. The moat around the castle appears to have been considerably enlarged at this time - creating the impression of a castle sitting in a lake - rather than a simple moated castle. To add to this, the Great Water was created by a further damming process¹⁰. This of course adds further to the picturesque aspect of the castle and to its tending to suggest the grandest imaginable "pavilion on pool" arrangement¹¹.

Obviously a good deal of defensive work was also done. The moat itself was not purely decorative - there are similarities to the moat created at the Tower of London. The curtain wall around the larger island, the barbican bridge connecting the two islands and much of the gatehouse work can also be traced to this era and finds echoes in Edwardian castles elsewhere.

But one should bear in mind that though more obviously an Edwardian interest, Eleanor's family - very military minded - had written at length about the importance of keeping

⁸ Farmer La Zisa/Gloriette Cultural interaction in Sicily France and Britain:

http://www.history.ucsb.edu/projects/histpublications/files/01773-jba_farmer_eprint.pdf

⁹ Currently completing a PhD on 'Parks, Gardens and Designed Landscapes of Medieval North Wales and North West Shropshire'

¹⁰ The exact date of these innovations is hard to pinpoint, but the recent Oxford University archaeological survey, as reflected in the audio visual presentation now in place at the Castle, is consistent with my view that it was on Eleanor's watch that the castle was transformed from simple moated Castle to a castle apparently floating on an extensive lake.

¹¹ Again there are parallels at La Zisa and Hesdin. See Farmer op cit.

castles in good defensive order and one can assume that Edward's attention to this was at least encouraged and understood by Eleanor.

Eleanor influenced the castle in other ways too. She would never leave a garden unimproved, and the provision of an aviary in the gardens at Leeds suggests that a real pleasure garden was planned - and substantially executed. Certainly as well as fishponds there was a park and planned gardens, which suggests the kind of distinctions between formal gardens and wildernesses that prevailed in Castilian gardens and which are now being traced in the Welsh castles - at least Rhuddlan and Conwy appear to have had dual garden plans.

Eleanor's visits to Leeds

Sadly Eleanor died in 1290 before work was complete, but even as the improvements progressed, the Royal party frequently found time to visit and these visits offer some interesting points of insight.

After the 1278 acquisition, a first visit was paid in summer 1279, just after the return from a visit to France, where Eleanor was confirmed as Countess of Ponthieu, her mother having just died. This visit possibly offered such birthday celebrations as Edward I took that year of his fortieth birthday as the party arrived just days after his birthday.

However we should note that the castle had been in the hands of impecunious lords for nearly 20 years, and had only just been acquired the previous year. Almost beyond doubt therefore it was either unimproved, or a building site at the time and it will have remained a building site to a greater or lesser extent right up until Eleanor's death. The bath house, for example, was only ordered in the last year of her life. But Eleanor and Edward had form for living on building sites - for example at Caernarfon, and the birth of the future Edward II in 1284. This tells us a good deal about their down to earth nature and about their joint interest in building projects. As a couple, Edward and Eleanor got their feet and hands dirty!

Further visits were made in 1280, 1285 and 1286. The visits tell us other things about them. Lots of wine was ordered in - they liked a good party. Lots of pork and beef was also put in stock for their hearty appetites. In 1285 they sent on their baker ahead of them to Paris - so they could be sure of decent baked goods in that benighted city!

And even while they were in Gascony we can see how important Leeds had become - many messengers stop here, and are reimbursed for expenses from here. Hence we know that it was quite an administrative centre for royal administration generally. There are a couple of mentions of John of Brabant, Margaret's fiancé, which suggests that his household may have been based here (he lived in England for several years prior to his marriage in 1290).

Leeds was however more than a place for visiting for pleasure - it became the administrative centre of Eleanor's landholdings in Kent. The way Eleanor's properties worked was that they were divided into roughly seven property centres. Each property or group of properties was administered by a local agent, who then reported to the head agent for that property area, who would be based at one of the larger properties, or a property which was well established in Eleanor's portfolio. In Kent the property centre was Leeds.

From 1285 the agent there was one John de Ponte, who owed his introduction to Eleanor's service to her most senior agent, the venal and ruthless Walter de Kancia who apparently

defrauded Eleanor and bullied her tenants. De Ponte appears to have been a fairly insalubrious character himself; while bailiff in Norwich he ejected a certain Mr Bolytoute from his house, having him cast into jail, and then used the house to entertain a prostitute, one Joan la Converse.

There were essentially three groups of properties in the Kent department. A central swathe running from Chatham through Leeds down to Brenchley near Tonbridge, some outlying to the north west - near Eleanor's Surrey properties and three near Dover - West Cliffe (now Walleys Court Hotel) the port of Sandwich and Tilmanstone.

Eleanor's final visit was immediately on return from France in 1289 - 16-27 August. It was the nearest thing to a holiday that Eleanor took that year and the wedding of one of Eleanor's female cousins, Marie de Pécquigny to Almeric de St Amand was celebrated at the castle.

After Eleanor's death a service commemorating her was held at Leeds, and a chantry was established in her memory by Edward, which continued to honour her memory until the Dissolution of the monasteries.

Eleanor's continuing connection with Leeds

Eleanor was, of course, not the only influential owner of Leeds Castle. The two later owners who appear to have cherished its history the most are Charles Wykeham Martin and Olive, Lady Baillie. Both were related to Eleanor of Castile.

Charles Wykeham Martin was the son of Fiennes Wykeham, a descendant through his grandmother Vere Alicia Fiennes of the Barons Saye and Sele, whose Fiennes family were cousins of Eleanor's maternal family in Ponthieu. Eleanor was responsible for arranging the first advantageous marriage which settled this branch of the Fiennes family in England, and therefore it may be said that they owe their position and affluence to her. The main branch of the Saye and Sele family also actually descend from Eleanor and Edward, owing to a marriage into the royally descended Cecil family by the Second Viscount. However Charles Wykeham Martin's family descend from the first Viscount, and therefore just miss the direct connection.

With Lady Baillie however that closer connection exists. Lady Baillie was born Olive Paget. As the sizeable portrait in the hall of Leeds Castle attests she descends from Field Marshal Lord Henry Paget, First Marquess of Anglesey. He himself descends direct from Lettice Knollys, whose grandmother was Mary Boleyn. Mary, like her sister Anne had multiple lines of descent from Eleanor:

- Through the Butlers of Ormonde from Edward I and Eleanor's daughter Princess Elizabeth of Rhuddlan.
- By their paternal great-great-grandmother, Lady Anne Montacute, daughter of the 3rd Earl of Salisbury from their older daughter Joan of Acre.
- Through the Howard line from Edward I and Eleanor of Castile via Elizabeth of Rhuddlan to their great-great-grandmother Lady Margaret Mowbray.

Thus the greatest of the developers and custodians of Leeds Castle were linked to Eleanor by blood, and in the case of Lady Baillie by multiple direct descent. When one looks at the enthusiasm with which Lady Baillie revived the castle, and made it a place for pleasurable

stays, exactly as Eleanor did, one is tempted to think that Eleanor's genes showed themselves strongly in her descendant. Certainly Eleanor would have wholeheartedly approved Lady Baillie's focus on luxurious domestic appointments – always a matter close to her own heart in her homes. Particularly she would have adored the bathrooms – the last word in luxury in their day as her King's Bath House had been in hers. She would also have loved the ebony sprung dance floor – after all she and Edward once hosted a party where the dancing was so enthusiastic that the floor collapsed! Eleanor the fitness fanatic, who rode every day would have approved the introduction of tennis and squash courts – and adored the swimming pool – so reminiscent of the Castilian love of water. And even Lady Baillie's introduction of zebras and llamas would have amused Eleanor. She after all had brought back a lion and a lynx from her travels. All in all the two great ladies of Leeds Castle seem to have been kindred spirits, as well as direct relations.

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