

## TAPESTRY TALES – LEEDS CASTLE'S TAPESTRIES TOUR

Among the treasures at Leeds Castle are 23 intricately detailed and expertly woven tapestries. More than a quarter date from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and are of international significance. Many were acquired by the last private owner of Leeds Castle, Olive, Lady Baillie, and her second husband, Arthur Wilson Filmer: the newly married couple bought Leeds Castle together in 1926 and furnished it in the medieval style. Tapestries purchased from leading art dealers of the day were the perfect evocation of the period they were seeking to emulate and recalled the abiding influence of the Castle's 13<sup>th</sup>-century owner, Queen Eleanor of Castile. By looking in detail at the tapestries on display at Leeds Castle, we can see the sometimes complex narratives woven into them.



## TAPESTRIES: AN OVERVIEW

Tapestry is one of the oldest forms of woven textiles. For centuries these beautiful objects were among prized possessions of kings and queens, nobles and popes. Tapestry making was a craftsman's trade that demanded seven years' apprenticeship and was handed down through generations of families. During the medieval and Tudor periods, tapestries were seen as portable as well as fixed objects, which often accompanied the royal court on its national and international progress. King Henry VIII was a big fan: at his death in 1547 he owned nearly 2,500 tapestries, with a number being listed at Leeds Castle during the previous decade. Tapestries and textiles featured in the elaborate tournament, held in France, 'The Field of Cloth of Gold' in 1520 and the media was subsequently used to commemorate the event.

These objects were awe-inspiring and intimidating, decorative and functional, used to furnish royal apartments and also to keep inhabitants warm. Over time, the use and display of tapestries evolved. More permanent wall coverings became the vogue and tapestries consequently formed part of the permanent historic fabric of a site. They were often cut down to size and made to fit the interiors, a trend once again associated with royalty, this time with Queen Victoria (r. 1837-1901).

Starting in the Dining Room, take a tour of the ground floor of Leeds Castle to find out more about the tapestries on display and their significance to the site, from the 13<sup>th</sup>-century to the present day.

## DINING ROOM

The Dining Room at Leeds Castle was designed in the 1930s by French interior designer Stéphane Boudin. Integral to the scheme created by Boudin, which creatively fuses elements of English, French and Chinese design, are the five highly decorative tapestries fixed into the 'water-green' wood panelling.



Displaying tapestries in fixed frames was known as the 'French manner', advocated by Boudin who was renowned for bringing French flair to the English country house. They date from c.1780 and bear all the hallmarks of the Rococo movement, which originated in France earlier that century. The tapestries are thought to have been produced in either Aubusson or Beauvais, two major French districts specialising in the manufacture of tapestries during the 18th century.

Lady Baillie acquired the tapestries as two separate sets in 1939 from Maison Jansen, the leading French interior design firm which Boudin was president of. As a group, they provided the final flourish to his innovative interior scheme, complementing the exotic Chinoiserie ceramics



mounted on the painted walls and the ornate 18th-century cartel clock created by André Charles Boulle displayed above the fireplace.

Inherently whimsical and playful, the elaborate tapestry designs juxtapose animals with musical motifs and pastoral elements, framed within classical columns. Look closely and you can see swans (bought to Leeds Castle's moat by Lady Baillie), dogs, poultry and falcons among fruit, fauna, flora, foliage and water.

## PRIVATE DINING ROOM

An astute collector, the owner of Leeds Castle bought and sold tapestries, some of which are now in international collections. From its inception, Lady Baillie's intimate Private Dining Room, used by only a privileged few, was adorned with tapestries.



The room was photographed in December 1936 for *Country Life* with three 16<sup>th</sup>-century tapestries depicting literary or biblical subject matter, now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, USA, on the walls. The three tapestries now displayed also date from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and were acquired by Lady Baillie during the 1920s and 30s.

The tapestries on display are expressions of the 'verdure' tradition, which was popularised in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and which celebrated organic life forms. The popularity of the verdure tapestry in the 1500s can be linked to 'recent voyages to the New World, whose fauna and flora began to be described in botanical publications in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, just as these tapestries emerged.' This genre evoked the beauty of nature, bringing the gardens into the historic

environment through the media of textile. It offered viewers an opportunity to escape into these natural worlds, eschewing modern life and trends in favour of more timeless and enduring subjects. During the 20<sup>th</sup>-century at Leeds Castle, these tapestries could have been deployed as a way to celebrate the wider estate and to bring the nature outside within its stone walls.

Look closely and you will be able to see animals hiding among the large leafed blue foliage in the two tapestries facing one another on opposite walls, including a lion, lioness, rabbits and birds. 'The Secret Garden' tapestry hanging on the far wall



dates from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and is full of activity and rich in symbolism, including that with potentially biblical connotations.

The scene is set in a densely packed forest, with the action concentrated on an enclosure and its surroundings. The entrance to the secret garden is marked by an elaborate gate, topped by birds and seemingly protected by a number of ferocious looking animals. The image is populated with people, wild animals and fantastical beasts, including a mythological gryphon (characterised by a lion's body combined with a bird's head). Deer are depicted inside the defended garden, which centres on an ornate fountain, with a lion and a leopard among the animals guarding the foreground. Hunters on horseback with hounds appear in the background, along with a number of built structures. There is a sense of tension between the hunters and the hunted, highlighted by the protection afforded by the garden, which is under threat from predators. For hundreds of years hunting was a popular sport for the royal court and therefore a popular subject matter for tapestries.



A fenced environment such as the one seen here is reminiscent of the Garden of Paradise, although writers are undecided whether there are biblical meanings to tapestries like 'The Secret Garden', or whether they simply depict a classical garden. An enclosed garden was described in the Bible in the Song of Solomon, with the fountain denoting 'the well of living waters' and there have been suggestions that the deer (representing the human soul) combined with the fountain of life, link the object with Christian symbolism. The symbolism is not overt, however, and may only be a subtext to an image which primarily depicts a hunting scene set within a quasi-magical realm. What is certain is that tapestry designers and patrons were consistently drawn to the subject of the secret garden in the

late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and it was a subject that continued to compel collectors, like Lady Baillie, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## PRIVATE WRITING ROOM

The Flemish tapestry, which dates from the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, on the left as you walk in the door was conserved by a team of professionals in 2019: it was sent to the De Wit for professional cleaning (the De Wit in Belgium is a recognised world leader in the conservation and restoration of ancient tapestries) and then transported closer to home to the Textile Conservancy in Kent for further conservation treatment, before being re-displayed in Lady Baillie's Private Writing Room in 2022.

Now much brighter following treatment the tapestry has still faded from time: the colours were once much more vivid, as can still be seen on the reverse of the tapestry. In keeping with the 'verdure' tradition, the scene



is woven with three birds, including a kingfisher, and flowering plants amidst large-leafed blue-green foliage set on a contrasting dark background. The scene is framed by a continuous border, adorned with an abundance of fruit and flowers.

By contrast, the tapestry on the opposite wall has not received any recorded intensive treatment, which is a costly undertaking.

Following a re-presentation of this room in 2022, the tapestry was released from a restricted location behind a large cabinet and was subsequently able to receive a much needed surface clean; however,

a more comprehensive clean and treatment is required and this tapestry will be prioritised for both when funds become available. Like its counterpart, this tapestry is woven with birds and flowers, intermingled with large-leafed blue-green foliage framed by a border populated with fruit, flowers and allegorical figures.

## SALON & COURTYARD

For centuries tapestries were used to adorn royal settings and to denote status and taste of the owner. This dominant and enduring trend is thought to have been established by the first queen to own Leeds Castle, Queen Eleanor of Castile, who was born in what is now modern day Spain.

During Eleanor's ownership (1278-1290), Leeds Castle was a site of luxury and comfort, containing fine expensive items, ranging from small scale ornaments to large scale tapestries. Decorating a room with tapestries was seen as

quintessentially Spanish and records survive which illustrate her passion for collecting and displaying tapestries in keeping with the tradition of her birth country.

Eleanor lent tapestries to close friends even employed her own tapestry keeper and it is thought that her preferences 'set the fashion for the court: one of the duties of .. (the) royal chamberlain was to "ensure that the king's chambers and banquets ... are adorned with hangings"'.



Like Eleanor, Olive, Lady Baillie stamped her own distinctive personality on Leeds Castle, and like Eleanor, she had a taste for the finer things in life and the ability to indulge her passions. It is not surprising that both women looked to decorative tapestries, imbued with energy, colour, drama and symbolism, to furnish their lavish country retreats, which became extensions of their own personalities. There could be no more appropriate object than a tapestry to choose for this purpose.

## **LEEDS CASTLE FOUNDATION**

As an independent charity, Leeds Castle relies on our visitors, guests and supporters to help us preserve this special place. The funds raised from donations, admission tickets, our overnight guests and everyone who comes to our events are vital so we can carry out important conservation work to maintain the Castle, grounds and collections. Thank you.