

Pentillie

CASTLE AND ESTATE

SIR JAMES TILLIE AND THE BUILDING OF PENTILLIE

James Tillie (November 16, 1645 to November 15, 1713), an extraordinary man of dubious character, built Pentillie Castle in 1698. He had emerged from humble origins to become the agent for Sir John Coryton who owned a large estate called Newton Ferrers that bounds Pentillie land.

Sir John died, unexpectedly and in great agony, at the young age of 42 and James promptly married his widow Elizabeth. There were allegations that he had been rather too familiar with Elizabeth before the death of her husband and, locally at least, there was suspicion that Sir John might have been poisoned.

This marriage greatly improved James' wealth and 'soon after King James II came to the Crown, by a great sum of money and false representation of himself, obtained the favour of knighthood at his hands'.¹ He was knighted in 1687. At about this time Tillie commissioned a life-sized statue of himself in a classically commanding pose similar to the Charles II statue that stands at the Royal Hospital in Chelsea. Sir James Tillie's statue still stands in front of Pentillie.

THE DEATH OF SIR JAMES TILLIE

Sir James Tillie died in 1713. Despite being childless, he had taken steps to ensure he was remembered and could keep a watchful eye over his estate long after he was gone.

He ordered the building of a towering, three-storey mausoleum on a high hill, called Mount Ararat, overlooking the River Tamar and the castle. He left instructions that he be placed in this mausoleum, dressed in his best clothes, wig and a fine hat. He requested that his hands be placed on his knees and be secured with iron bands. Around him was to be placed a chest of oak containing his books and other personal effects, including port and cigars.

He intended to sit there and wait for his resurrection which, he expected, would be within two years and that he could then return to Pentillie. His loyal staff carried out these instructions and there he sat for a full two years while his remains – and the roof of the mausoleum – slowly deteriorated.

His staff became increasingly distressed at the decay until eventually his mortal remains were buried, although history does not relate whether this occurred at the mausoleum or the nearby St Mellion churchyard. A marble statue was erected in his place in the mausoleum which remains in the same commanding spot today, although now overgrown with brambles.

THE CORYTON MOVE TO PENTILLIE

The story of how the Coryton family came to be owners of Pentillie is somewhat convoluted as neither the Tillie nor Coryton family had an obvious line of descent through which to pass their respective estates.

Sir James, having died childless in 1713, left Pentillie to his nephew James Wooley who changed his surname to Tillie and came to live at Pentillie. This James and his wife, Esther, had a son, also James. James married Mary and had a daughter called Mary Jemima to whom they left Pentillie.

¹ Hal's: *History of Cornwall*

Similarly, the Coryton family of Newton Ferrers had no sons so the remainder of the original Coryton Estate had gone to a cousin – Peter Goodall. Peter changed his name to Coryton at Crocadon, a farm at St Mellion that to this day is part of the Pentillie Estate.

The families joined when Mary Jemima Tillie, of Pentillie, married Peter Coryton, of Crocadon, and so the Coryton family came to Pentillie on their second encounter with the Tillie family.

PENTILLIE BECOMES A CASTLE

The Coryton family prospered through the Eighteenth Century and their lands amounted to more than twenty thousand acres, extending nearly to Liskeard.

During this time of great prosperity, in 1809, the family commissioned renowned landscape architect Humphry Repton, to draw up a proposal for remodelling the castle and landscaping the gardens and parkland around the castle. He produced one of his famous Red Books describing and illustrating his proposals.

Repton was convinced that, were the slopes to the river heavily wooded, the position of Pentillie would lend itself to becoming an impressive castle and his drawings relied heavily on this idea. William Wilkins, the notable architect with a Gothic flair whose buildings include the National Gallery and Cornwall's Tregothnan, was employed to implement these proposals in 1810.

As a result, Pentillie was completely rebuilt with the addition of three wings to form a central courtyard on the west side of the original house. Many etchings, drawings and photographs exist showing the stately and, by now, Gothic castle.

THE CASTLE REMODELLED

Pentillie remained a commanding castle for more than two centuries under the constant ownership of the Coryton family. William Coryton, born in 1847, was a respected huntsman and was the master of the Dartmoor fox hounds. Hunt members held him in high esteem and commissioned a large portrait of him as Master of Hounds from Frank Paton, a noted animal artist, which still hangs in Pentillie Castle today. With the painting survives a beautiful book listing the 160 people who paid for the commission. William married Evelyn (Parker) and had three boys and three girls. They grew up at Pentillie and this happy time is recorded in two books they wrote recounting daily events and memorable happenings such as the visit of Edward VII in 1902.

William Coryton died in 1919 leaving Pentillie to his eldest son John, known as Jack. Captain Jack Coryton, (b1888) married Dorothy (Parker Jervis) and they had two sons; Peter and Jeffrey. Jack was an austere man who took great pride in the estate and was interested that each of the tenants and workers were supported by their farming enterprises. The eldest, Peter, was very much his father's favourite. When Peter was killed fighting in Egypt in 1942, Jack publicly lamented the loss of his heir, which must have been extremely hurtful to Jeffrey. The Second World War brought mixed emotions to Pentillie, as during this period, the South Wing of Pentillie Castle, despite the lack of amenities, was considered of great importance to many young mothers in the locality. During the war, it was requisitioned as a maternity ward; many prospective mothers being sent from Plymouth to have their babies in the relative peace and quiet of Pentillie Castle. During the 1950s and early 60s Jack seemed to lose heart in maintaining the estate possibly because of financial pressure but also because he still mourned Peter. On Jack's death in 1965 Jeffrey took over a castle that was antiquated and in poor repair – with only one bathroom for 18 guest bedrooms and a dining room at the opposite corner of a huge house from its kitchen.

However, on inheriting the crumbling castle in 1965, Jeffrey Coryton, and his wife Kit, decided to demolish most of the 1810 construction. They remodelled the house as the large but manageable modern house it is today. Starting in 1966, they finished in 1968, before it became a listed building.

THE PRESENT FAMILY

Having served with distinction in the army, Jeffery was neither a farmer nor an estate manager. He had been awarded the Military Cross for 'determination and calm leadership' during a nine-hour action in Helchteren, Belgium, in September 1944. After the war he went to work in the City, entrusting the running of the estate to an agent who ensured the farms were let to tenants. By 1977, as several farm tenants were retiring, childless Jeffery began to consider to whom he should leave the estate on his death. He asked first cousin Ted Spencer, then in his early thirties and running a helicopter company in Scotland, to come and see him about taking on the vacant farmland and gradually taking over the estate from the agent.

Ted had no farming experience so spent six months gaining practical knowledge labouring on farms before moving to a farm on the estate while attending a year's farm management course at Seale Hayne agricultural college in 1979.

Plans were thrown into disarray when Jeffery died unexpectedly on May 2, 1980 at just 57. Under the terms of his will his wife, Kit, became life-tenant of the estate. She appointed Ted as its heir, providing he changed his name to Coryton.

Later, on the advice of her agent, Kit cancelled the farm partnership arrangement with Ted and withdrew into the castle, accompanied by her chef, Roger Langsford, who lived in the castle and looked after her until her death in September 2007.

Neither Ted, nor his wife, Sarah visited the castle during these years, although they lived and worked one of the estate farms only a mile away. Their three children, Sammie, Oliver and Roonie had never even been down the driveway of Pentillie until after Kit's death.

THE FUTURE

During these 27 years Ted and Sarah had done a convincing imitation of an ostrich and refused to consider the eventual problems that would inevitably occur on Kit's death. The unspoken expectation of the family had been that the estate would be sold, fast cars would be bought and that everyone would live happily ever after.

At the time of Kit's death, Ted had been working in Mauritania and Sammie had been living in Australia. It was not until the Christmas Eve following Kit's death that the family were able to gather in the kitchen at Pentillie. They locked the door, disconnected the telephone and discussed what to do about the future. By then Pentillie had grabbed each of them, much to their surprise and the decision was made to try to retain the castle and the main body of the estate for the family by establishing a business that would pay for the required structural repairs and refurbishment.

This process is now underway and a dedicated team has been assembled to oversee the changes and make the necessary repairs to roofs and walls. Planning permission, listed building consent, and a wedding licence have all been obtained and the future for Pentillie, which has been shut away and deteriorating for 27 long years, once again looks extremely exciting.