

Downton Abbey's (Highclere Castle) Architectural History

by

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Discovering a Beautiful Region of Britain
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(Larrabee Libraries)



Highclere Castle, Location for Downton Abbey

Highclere Castle – the location of the successful T.V. Series Downton Abbey has brought the Victorian and medieval mansions and stately homes of England back into world-wide focus.

The huge popularity of this series which uses Highclere Castle as its location has sparked great interest in British architecture and shone a spotlight onto the numerous ancient mansions and stately homes in this country. This interest, may in fact, may be instrumental in stopping the decline of these buildings whose numbers have been traveling on a slow downward

trajectory since the First World War. The curiosity aroused by this well-loved series has promoted a thirst for knowledge about British architecture and history from around the world.



Highclere Castle Today

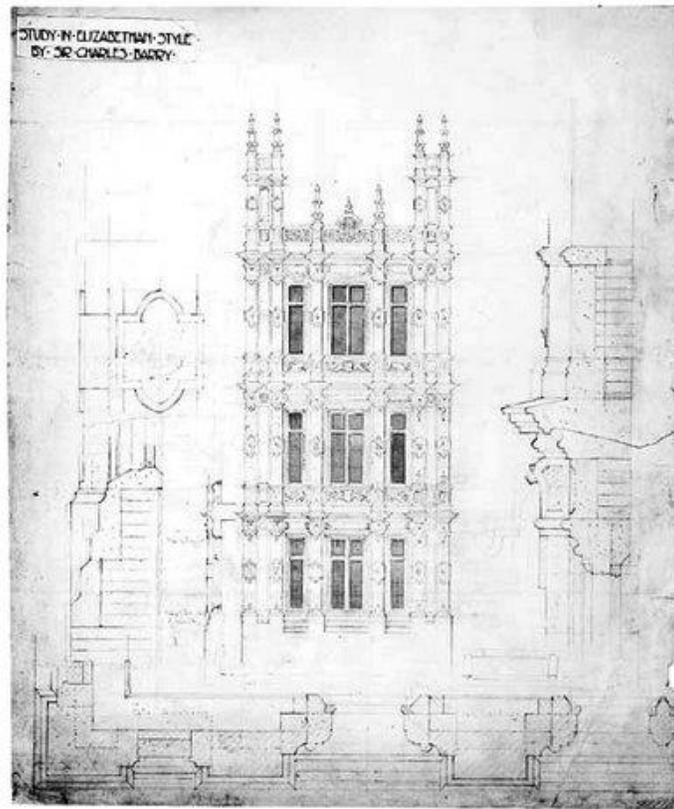
Highclere Castle, as it exists today, is situated on a 1000 acre estate in Berkshire and was rebuilt between 1839 – 1842 for the third Earl of Carnarvon by Sir Charles Barry, the architect of the Houses of Parliament. The architectural style of this latest version of Highclere Castle is classed as Jacobethan and its fascia material is of stone from the town of Bath. John Betjeman gave the name ‘Jacobethan’ to this form of architecture that incorporated elements of both Elizabethan and Gothic styles. English Renaissance architecture that was popular from 1550 to 1625 was revived in the 1820s and evolved into the Jacobethan style.



Mentmore in Buckinghamshire an example of Jacobethan architecture

This fashion subsequently became the hallmark of Victorian architecture and included features such as Tudor-style terra cotta bricks, arches and extended chimneys, elaborate carved brickwork, balustrades, pillars and parapets. Sandringham House in Norfolk, home of her Majesty the Queen represents a good example of the Jacobethan style.

Highclere Castle origins, like so many castles, mansions and stately homes in Britain, goes back to medieval times and beyond. An Anglo-Saxon charter indicates that this site has been populated for almost 1400 years.



Architectural Plans for Highclere Castle

It was the custom of British architects, through the centuries, to build upon the foundations of earlier buildings and on many occasions incorporate parts of these buildings into the new structure. The Victorian architects followed this trend by erecting the current Highclere Castle on the exact site of an earlier mansion. This earlier Georgian building was constructed on the foundations of the medieval palace of the Bishops of Winchester who had retained possession of this large estate since the 8th Century. An even earlier building was recorded as existing on this site in the Domesday Book. The Carnarvon family have owned and lived in Highclere since 1679.



8th Earl of Pembroke

In 1692 Robert Sawyer left what was then a mansion named Highclere to his daughter Margaret, wife of the 8th Earl of Pembroke. Their son Robert Sawyer Herbert inherited Highclere and became the owner of this mansion. He created the garden temples and assembled a collection of paintings. Robert Sawyer's heir Henry Herbert was created 1st Earl of Carnarvon by King George 111.



1st Earl of Carnarvon

This is the description (in part) of Highclere Castle given by the famous architectural historian Nicholas Pevsner and his co-writer David Lloyd.

The house is ashlar-faced, of three storeys with an additional storey in the accentuated parts. The windows are of the mullion-and-transom-cross type, with transoms higher up than in genuine Elizabethan houses. At the top is a strapwork balustrade. The front is much flatter than an Elizabethan front would be. There is in fact very little decoration – just ornamented pilasters in stressed places. ‘Ung Je Serviray’ the family motto carved above all the ground floor windows.

During the Victorian era Highclere Castle became a nexus of social and political activity. A multitude of socialites, politicians, technical innovators, aviators, soldiers, writers and Egyptologists populated the parties held there.



5th Earl of Carnarvon

The 5th Earl of Carnarvon discovered the tomb of Tutankhamen with Howard Carter adding another exotic aspect to the rich history of the Carnarvon family and their Castle. An Egyptian exhibition is a feature of Highclere Castle today.



Highclere Castle in the Great War

During the First World War Highclere Castle was turned into a hospital by Amina the 5th Countess of Carnarvon which treated soldiers wounded in Flanders in September 1914. The Castle became a private home again in 1922. The Castle was used again in the Second World War as a home for evacuated children from London.

Today the 8th Earl and Countess of Carnarvon live for part of the year in the Castle and the remainder of the time in a nearby home.



Highclere Castle Library

Only rooms on the ground floor are in use at the present time and these include the Foyer, Saloon, Library (which contains almost 6000 books, some of which date back to the 16th Century), Music Room, Smoking Room, Drawing Room and Dining Room (in which hangs Van Dyck's painting of Charles 1).



Charles I by Van Dyck

There are 11 bedrooms on the first floor of Highclere Castle with approximately 60 bedrooms on the upper floors.

The National Trust has done much to maintain many of the stately homes, mansions and castles of Britain but the enormous costs involved in keeping these buildings in good order is prohibitive. Many mansions are not in the care of the National Trust and their owners are having increasing difficulties in affording their maintenance. Perhaps the extraordinary success of Downton Abbey will raise awareness of the sorry plight of some of these buildings and prompt donations to help conserve them.

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www.spab.org.uk

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