

# Castle gets new life as campus

Queen's to turn  
15th-century castle  
into study centre

By Gary Smith  
Citizen correspondent

Queen's University in Kingston is giving new meaning to the Ivory tower.

Thanks to the generosity of an unassuming and wealthy alumnus, Herstmonceux Castle, together with 260 acres of surrounding estate in rural East Sussex, England, has become the property of Queen's.

While the university prefers not to say what was paid for the property, some sources put it at about \$12 million, not including additional funds donated by Alfred and Isabel Bader for development costs as a study centre. Alfred Bader is a Queen's grad who wanted to do something special for his alma mater.

So what does a Canadian university want with an English castle? It wants to enhance its role and reputation in international education and research, says Queen's. It says it will use Herstmonceux to provide opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students to get a more international education, particularly with respect to the U.K. and the European Community.

The Herstmonceux estate also accommodates what was once the Royal Greenwich Observatory (RGO), which became a scientific site after the British admiralty bought the property in 1948. The British Science Research Council took it over in 1955 and built the six-domed Equatorial Group of telescopes. From the 1950s through the late 1980s, Herstmonceux bubbled with the activity of hundreds of scientists and engineers.

While the observatory was moved to the Canary Islands in 1988, the Equatorial Group towers and telescopes remain — holding out intriguing possibilities for amateur scientists and students.

Tourists visiting this area steeped in medieval history will also be able to visit the castle. Dick Bowman, spokesman for Queen's, said the castle will be open to tourists next spring.

Built in the 1440s on land close to where William the Conqueror engaged Harold and his Saxons at Hastings in 1066, the castle is built of pink brick in a classic, towered design. It's 70 metres across at the moated entrance.



— Gary Smith photo

Old home: Fortified manor with 260 acres of estate dates to 1440s

As a Queen's alumnus, I was looking for Herstmonceux Castle and came across it almost by accident after a six-kilometre drive across the Pevensy Marsh. Pevensy is a kind of sister village to Herstmonceux and has its own castle. It is a forbidding Roman job, which some say William used as a place to muster his troops after the boat ride across the channel.

Herstmonceux lies in an area virtually steeped in medieval English history. Like the pretty village of Rye, fewer than 50 kilometres away, it was probably a landfall for smugglers and pirates in the 1700s.

Towns like this span East and West Sussex and Kent in stylish English countryside where truth and legend vie for attention.

We chose to make a 14th century English Inn steps from Herstmonceux the base for our visits to this ancient and storied part of England.

Herstmonceux Castle's original builder, Sir Roger Pienes, a veteran of the battle of Agincourt and Treasurer of the Household to Henry VI, needed and wanted a home, not a fortress. Herstmonceux wasn't built to withstand a siege.

Just outside the wire fence sealing off the Equatorial Group, we find Brian Hopkinson in his car. He's a retired meteorologist who says he likes to spend time watching things happen. He's waiting for a friend who plans to develop what Hopkinson calls "the world's most complete collection of water lily species" in the Equatorial Group's pool.

He tells my wife Sharon about the Canada geese who have adopted the castle moat as their own. "You know, every

night around 7, they gather on the commons out there and gab away to each other for half an hour or so. You wouldn't believe the noise they make. Then, suddenly, they begin taking off in squadrons, with great precision, just like military aircraft. Every night they do the same thing."

The people of Herstmonceux village, population about 400, have worried for years about what might become of their castle. Five years ago, a land developer tried to turn it into a golf course and vacation site. In time previous to that, it served in various roles, as a residence and even, for a time, as a private school.

Village merchants and business people aren't totally in accord with what should happen to it, but they approve of Queen's overall plans despite some differences of opinion about access routes to the castle.

As conversion of the castle to an educational institution progresses, university officials and Queen's alumni from all over the globe keep popping in out of curiosity, some in the mood to help if they can.

One such visitor is Jasper Wall, head of the RGO's astronomy division and deputy director at Cambridge University. Wall is a Canadian who went to high school in Vankleek Hill, about 100 kilometres south of Ottawa, before attending Queen's. He spent summers at the National Research Council in Ottawa and that helped steer him towards outer space.

Wall's already met with Queen's principal David Smith to discuss ways of establishing close ties between Queen's and the RGO. Through such talks, the remaining Equatorial Group telescopes at Herstmonceux Castle may continue to have a real usefulness.



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