



This is the east gate of two that are in front of the Castle Ashby near Olney, England. The castle was started in 1574 and continued construction through the early 1600s in Northamptonshire, just a few miles north of Olney. L&T photo/Larry Phillips

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If anyone plans a trip to Olney, England, for the Pancake Day events, there is plenty to see and do around the quaint village – from the parish church completed in 1325 to an ancient Roman paved road and the old lace factory.

If one is interested in England's past, such as knights and damsels in distress, there just happens to be a castle near Olney that's very accessible by car.

The attraction is Castle Ashby, which is about 15 miles north of Olney in Northamptonshire. Like all the terrain around Olney, it lies in the gentle, rolling green hills and covers hundreds of acres. It is also surrounded by numerous homes, cottages and warehouses that housed the hundreds of people that maintained the castle, and seemingly still do today .

Henry Crompton began building the Castle Ashby House in 1574, and construction continued until the early 1600s.

The main castle was built in an "E"-shaped design to celebrate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth I.



The frontage of today's castle didn't actually get its present look, though, until around 1694 when the front facade was added by Inigo Jones, one of Britain's foremost designers. Jones (Born July 15, 1573 – died June 21, 1652), was the first significant British architect of the early modern period and the first to employ Vitruvian rules of proportion and symmetry in his buildings.

It's believed he was also responsible for all the wording, in Latin, completely around the top of the house in large letters. Translated, it says: "Except the Lord build the house they Labour but in vain that built it: Except the Lord keep the house the watchmen waketh but in vain."

In 1695, King William the III, (William of Orange) visited the castle and suggested the Cromptons build four great avenues to the house – from the north, east, south and west. He also suggested planting landscaping trees, and they did - for 25 years.

Then in 1761, “England’s Greatest Gardener” made his appearance at the castle. Lancelot “Capability” Brown made his contribution to Castle Ashby.

Brown (Aug. 30, 1716 – Feb. 6, 1783) is remembered as “the last of the great English 18th century artists to be accorded his due.”

One of his first orders was to remove three of the great “avenues” to the castle, leaving only the south entrance that one sees today. He then designed and built the gardens that surround the northeast side of the castle.

Brown designed more than 170 parks, many of which still endure.

Today, there is still a huge greenhouse where plants are started from scratch to be transplanted on the grounds.

And, of course, no castle would be complete without the family cemetery and church. The Compton family church is quite a sight even today, after hundreds of years, it still has a large pipe organ similar in design to the one in Olney’s St. Peter and St. Paul Parish Church.

The castle is now owned by Earl Crompton, son of the 7th Marquis.

So when in Olney, take half a day and go see Castle Ashby. Regardless of the time of year, there is still a lot to experience, even if it is not “tourist season.”

EDITOR'S NOTE: To learn more about Castle Ashby, go to:
<http://www.castleashbygardens.co.uk/thegardens.html>

For more information and photos of Capability Brown's renowned works, go to:
Brownhttp://www.gardenvisit.com/biography/lancelot_capability_brown.