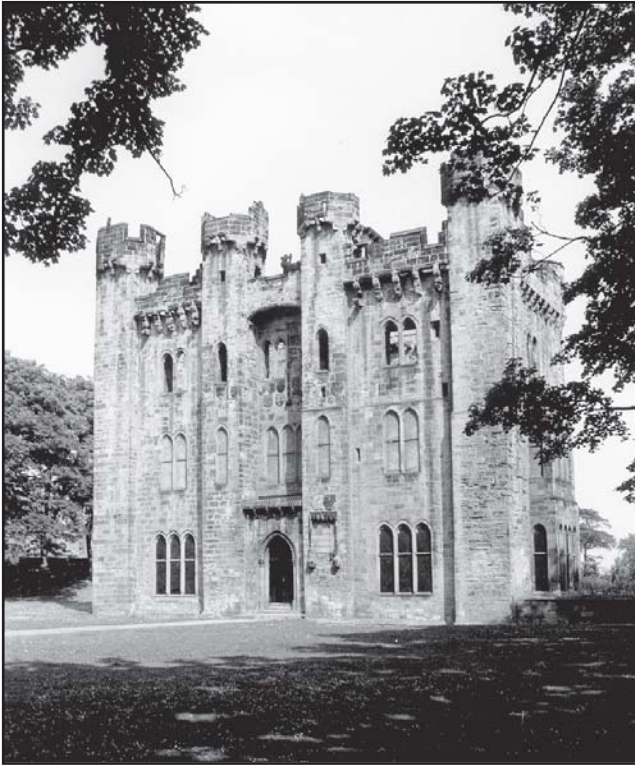


Hylton Castle & Dene



Hylton Castle, west front

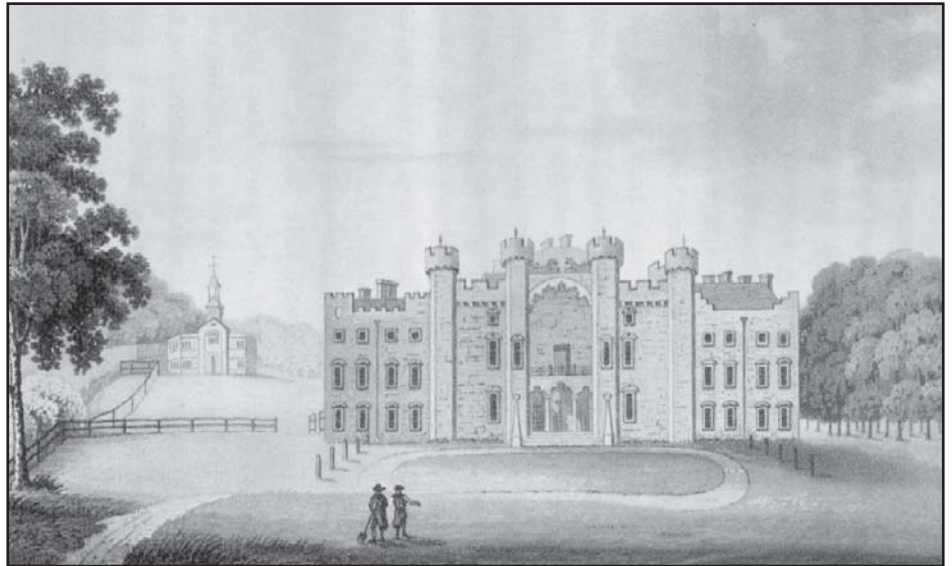
A history of the Castle

Hylton Castle was built by Sir William Hylton as a gatehouse style fortified manor house. Although no construction records survive, the style of the architecture and coats of arms on the west front mean that it dates to the 1390s or first decade of the 1400s.

Other buildings may have existed on the site at this time, as the inventory taken on Sir William's death in 1435 mentions a hall, four chambers, two barns, a kitchen and the chapel in addition to the castle.

Inventories of the Hylton estate show that few alterations were made to the castle until the 16th century, when floors and galleries were inserted in the Great Hall. Then, early in the 18th century, Baron John Hylton made the first major alterations. He completely redesigned the interior and inserted large windows in the fashionable Italianate style. Outside, he added a north wing to the castle.

His son, also John, made even greater alterations. He built a south wing and added crenellations (battlements) to both wings. He also replaced the original circular turret on the north end of the west front with an octagonal turret, and restored the main central entrance. When John died in 1746, the Hyltons sold the castle, as there was no male heir to inherit it. Successive owners failed to maintain it then, in 1863, it was bought by William Briggs. He knocked down the north and south wings, gutted the interior and added new windows. However, the castle soon fell into disrepair again.



Hylton Castle and Chapel c.1829

In 1950, due to local pressure, the castle was taken into the care of the State. The decay of the 19th century alterations was so advanced that it was decided to consolidate it as a stripped shell, to show all the remaining medieval masonry. The castle is now a listed building, and with the chapel forms a Scheduled Ancient Monument, under the guardianship of English Heritage.

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The Chapel

A chapel dedicated to St Catherine is known to have existed on the site since 1157, when it was likely that Hylton Castle was a wooden building. Nothing remains of the first chapel and the ruins seen today date from the early 15th century. The building was modified during the period from the late 15th to late 16th century, when a window and transepts were added. However, an engraving by Buck in 1728 shows that the chapel had gone out of use by that time, as it had no roof. Although repairs were carried out by the last Baron Hylton, and by its owners in the 19th century, the chapel also fell into disrepair and it too later became the responsibility of the State.

The Dene

Hylton Dene, the parkland around Hylton Castle, was transformed in the 1990s into a semi-natural site where both wildlife and people can enjoy the surroundings. The Dene covers an area of 200 acres and has Local Nature Reserve status. It has a variety of lowland habitats including woodland, scrubland, wetland and grassland and is home to many species of animals and birds. Its importance is signified by the designation of four Sites of Nature Conservation Importance and one Site of Special Scientific Interest within its boundaries.

The Dene is also the location for training of local horticultural students, and has a full time Wildlife Officer. The Hylton Dene Project works in partnership with Sunderland City Council, English Heritage, Durham Wildlife Trust and the Riverside Training Agency to maintain and care for the area, and develop the Dene for the future.

The 'cauld lad of Hylton'

Every self-respecting castle has its ghost and Hylton Castle is no exception. The ghost is normally associated with a murder that took place in 1609. Lord Robert Hylton had ordered his horse to be made ready for an important journey, and when it had not been brought to him after one hour, he went to the stables to find out why. He found the stable boy, Roger Skelton, asleep and, in his anger, is said to have drawn his sword and decapitated him. He tried to hide the body, but it was later discovered and the baron was tried for murder. He was acquitted, and so the spirit of the dead boy came back to haunt him.

Another story associated with the ghost is that of a poltergeist who liked to tidy the castle kitchen if left in a mess, but would make it untidy if it was left clean. The servants grew tired of his pranks and left out clothes for him, which was the way to banish ghosts. On taking them he disappeared from the castle saying "Here's a cloak, and here's a hood. The Cauld Lad o' Hylton will do na' mair good". However, his ghostly voice continued to be heard long afterwards.

The term "cauld" is likely to be a derivative of the local word "cowed", which means a steer that has had its horns cut off. When used to describe humans, the same term means "headless".

Find out more about Hylton Castle and Hylton Dene

For more information, visit the Local Studies Centre at Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre, which has many books on the history of Hylton Castle, Chapel and Dene, such as:

- "The Castle in the Community. The Hylton Family and Castle" by The Friends of Hylton Dene (2002)
- "The Hiltons of Hilton Castle" by W P Swaby (1884)

The Dene is open every day, and visitors can experience nature and heritage in its peaceful surroundings.