



Attraction Review:

Oxford Castle Quarter

Reviewed by
Matt Wright

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"What is it with the weather system here at Oxford Castle?" I wondered to myself. After an Indian Summer which had seen the beach come to the Market Square, we were now due an Arctic Winter, with 2ft of snow promised by the weekend. On second thoughts though, that wouldn't sound quite so far-fetched... were it not for the fact that this particular snowfall was coming complete with its own contingent of elves.

That's Oxford Castle all over though - surprising, innovative, and diverse. From Shakespeare in the Summer, to Ghost Tours at Halloween, to the ping-pong tables sprinkled around at random (sorry, whiff-whaff tables for the local intelligentsia), this is a space that refuses to be pigeon-holed. Which is ironic, as for much of its life, Oxford Castle has been just that - a place of confinement and of uniformity.

For a person such as myself, who loves information and trivia, the prison tour was fascinating (fact: wardens were named 'screws' after a Victorian punishment wheel), with a traditional museum exhibition floor, containing grisly stories (such as the Catholic bookseller in Henry VIII's reign, who had to cut off his own ears) and macabre mementos (the original gallows, last used in 1952).

For the more visual, there are character actors who accompany tour groups around the prison, ranging from Norman knights, to Georgian highwaymen, to Victorian prison wardens. I met with Michael, the 6ft 4" Castle Manager (no, not a character actor - the real deal), who explained to me how important it was to engage the visitors, both old and young alike.

"We get a lot of foreign visitors, and a lot of school children - they really respond to a more visual experience. The character actors help bring the whole experience to life - each has their own style, and recreates prison life as it was in their day."

As I follow Michael up the narrow stone staircase to the top of St George's Tower (fact: always spiraling anti-clockwise, so defenders would have their sword arm free), he tells me of his plans for the prison in 2014, without pausing for breath, and whilst ducking adroitly under the tiny doorways (fact: not because people were tiny back in those days, but to retain heat... I think I'd better stop with the facts now, before I start to bore everyone).

Feeling rather parched, we headed over to Cafe 1071 for coffee & cake. I walked back through the Quarters, admiring the hustle and bustle of activity, before pausing for a quick browse around the O3 Art Gallery. I did sneak a final quick peek behind me, looking for signs of the impending Snow Factory, but it seemed that, for now, Elvish had left the building.

44-46 New Rd, Oxford OX1 1AY

Tel: 01865 260666

Web: www.oxfordcastlequarter.com

www.inoxford.com