



LEEDS CASTLE'S BIG 900

★ A STORY WRITING CHALLENGE ★

Winner of the 10-13 Age Category

Nine-Hundred Years

By Ella Davey, Age 12

I have been here a *long* time. And I mean a *very* long time. A good nine hundred years to be exact. And no – I am not Leeds Castle itself – this isn't one of those deeply moving stories all about each individual brick or stone slab and about how times have changed.

Oh no.

This isn't one of those stories at all.

I am not going to tell you who I am either: it would just scare you. And I can be very scary when I want to be. But you're in luck because I'm not feeling particularly scary today. In fact, I feel quite the opposite. The birds are singing in the trees and the lake water is lapping up against the banks. The sun's in the sky and everything feels just right.

"And this – lady's and gentlemen – is the famous drawbridge that King Henry the Eighth himself would have walked across," the tour guide pauses for all the 'ooh's and 'ah's.

Maybe it won't be such a perfect morning after all. This happens quite a lot, you know. It may come as a shock to you but I have grown used to such a colossal intrusion of my privacy on a regular basis. I've also grown used to the tour guides. They know next to nothing about this place but swagger about the place like they own it anyway! I'm not even allowed one moment of peace before the visitors arrive and walk all over me, pointing their fingers and frantically jotting things down in their booklets.

(And I'm not the drawbridge by the way, so you can stop feeling all smart for that one.)

"Look at that!" a little girl says. I usually tune out after a bit, so the only reason I catch it is because her voice is so shrill that my ears have no other choice but to hear.

"Yes, it's a beautiful tree, dear," the girl's mother replies only half listening. *I'm* not only half listening. I'm straining my ears to catch every last syllable that escapes that little girl's lips. I'm listening with every ounce of listening ability I still have at my age – yes, nine-hundred is old, I know – because the little girl is pointing directly at me.

At me!

Me!

She's pointing at *me!*

I flatten out whatever form of hair I have retained from my youth and think of something intelligent to say. Wouldn't want to mess up my first impression – in nine-hundred years! *Think of something smart!* I tell myself, *something smart!*

"It's not a tree, Mummy," the girl says, her eyes following me as I dart around, desperately trying to come up with something sophisticated to say.

"That's nice, honey," the mother is too engrossed in the tour. That will never do, my only chance of being noticed in nine hundred years will not be sabotaged by a tour! I may not be incredible at first impressions, but I sure do know how to stir up trouble...

This way!

That way!

Over here!

Over there!

People lose their balance and tumble into the lake. The booklets are soaked and the tour guide is on the verge of regaining her balance when – oops! – she topples over the edge and hits the water with a splash!

Now people will notice me. Surely.

No more tour to worry about and no more booklets to tick off and jot notes in. I wait for all the heads to turn my way and for the look on their faces when they see me! They don't turn towards me at all. In fact, now they seem even more insistent on their silly tour. Even the little girl is distracted.

Great.

They all help the tour guide back up and attempt – to some extent – to dry their booklets. The little girl is watching me now but nobody else is. Why! Why won't they notice me!? The girl tugs at her brother's sleeve but he swats her off. She tries again, "Look. Look over there. Can you see it?" the boy squints in my general direction, but shakes his head and tunes back into the tour guide and her speech.

He actually looked at me, though? Why didn't he see me?

I approach the girl and decide to go with my first choice, "How do you do?" the girl's eyes bulge and she begins to fidget with her fingers. She's not talking? Have I broken her? "I'm doing fine," she says proudly at last. Now I'm stuck, what next?

"Well done," I say randomly. The girl looks confused.

"Well done' for being fine?" she asks and cocks her head to the side.

"Its very difficult to be fine. So well done," I say. There is a ghostly silence. "I have a question, little girl. Why can't your brother see me? And why couldn't your mother see me either?" the girl almost laughs at that.

"Not many people can see the dead," she says with the ghost of a smile on her face.

I have the smile of a ghost on mine.