



ST. MARY THE VIRGIN

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The Medieval Castle

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INTRODUCTION



Castles

Protecting strategically important coastlines, passes, and roadways, castles were an essential part of medieval warfare. With such key features as a tower keep, fortified gatehouses, curtain walls with crenellations and a surrounding moat, they provided protection for a garrison of knights and permitted rulers to stamp their authority on troublesome regions of their kingdom. The Normans are credited with spreading the idea of castles across Europe in the 11th century, first with the simpler motte and bailey castle and then stone castles from the 12th century. Castles were also the hubs of rural communities where a lord administered the local economy, conducted courts, and provided such essential services as milling grain.

This publication examines various components of the medieval castle.



Normans

were an ethnic group that arose from contact between Norse Viking settlers of a region in France, named Normandy after them, and indigenous Franks and Gallo-Romans. The settlements in France followed a series of raids on the French coast from mainly Denmark, but also Norway, and Iceland, and they gained political legitimacy when the Viking leader Rollo agreed to swear fealty to King Charles III of West Francia. The distinct cultural and ethnic identity of the Normans emerged initially in the first half of the 10th century, and it continued to evolve over the succeeding centuries. The Norman dynasty had a major political, cultural and military impact on medieval Europe and the Near East. The **House of Normandy** is the usual designation for the family that were the counts of Rouen, dukes of Normandy and kings of England which immediately followed the Norman conquest of England and lasted until the House of Plantagenet came to power in 1154.

What is a Castle?

Scholars debate the scope of the word *castle*, but usually consider it to be the private fortified residence of a lord or noble. This is distinct from a palace, which is not fortified; from a fortress, which was not always a residence for royalty or nobility; and from a fortified settlement, which was a public defense – though there are many similarities among these types of construction. Usage of the term has varied over time and has been applied to structures as diverse as hill forts and country houses. Over the approximately 900 years that castles were built, they took on a great many forms with many different features, although some, such as curtain walls, arrow slits, and portcullises, were commonplace.

In its simplest terms, the definition of a castle accepted amongst academics is "a private fortified residence".

This contrasts with earlier fortifications, such as Anglo-

Saxon burhs and walled cities such as Constantinople and Antioch in the Middle East; castles were not communal defenses but were built and owned by the local feudal lords, either for themselves or for their monarch. Feudalism was the link between a lord and his vassal where, in return for military service and the expectation of loyalty, the lord would grant the vassal land. In the late 20th century, there was a trend to refine the definition of a castle by including the criterion of feudal ownership, thus tying castles to the medieval period; however, this does not necessarily reflect the terminology used in the medieval period. During the First Crusade (1096–1099), the Frankish armies encountered walled settlements and forts that they indiscriminately referred to as castles, but which would not be considered as such under the modern definition.

Castles served a range of purposes, the most important of which were military, administrative, and domestic. As well as defensive structures, castles were also offensive tools which could be used as a base of operations in enemy territory. Castles were established by Norman invaders of England for both defensive purposes and to pacify the country's inhabitants. As William the Conqueror advanced through England, he fortified key positions to secure the land he had taken. Between 1066 and 1087, he established 36 castles such as Warwick Castle, which he used to guard against rebellion in the English Midlands.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, castles tended to lose their military significance due to the advent of powerful cannons and permanent artillery fortifications; as a result, castles became more important as residences and statements of power. A castle could act as a stronghold and prison but was also a



CASTLE is derived from the Latin word *castellum*, which is a diminutive of the word *castrum*, meaning "fortified place". The Old English *castel*, Old French *castel* or *chastel*, French *château*, Spanish *castillo*, Portuguese *castelo*, Italian *castello*, and a number of words in other languages also derive from *castellum*. The word *castle* was introduced into English shortly before the Norman Conquest to denote this type of building, which was then new to England.

place where a knight or lord could entertain his peers. Over time the aesthetics of the design became more important, as the castle's appearance and size began to reflect the prestige and power of its occupant. Comfortable homes were often fashioned within their fortified walls. Although castles still provided protection from low levels of violence in later periods, eventually they were succeeded by country houses as high status residences.

Evolution

A good location for a castle was on a natural rise, near a cliff, on the bend of a river, or where older fortifications such as Roman walls could be usefully reused. Castles needed their own water and food supplies and usually a permanent defensive force, additional factors to be considered when choosing a location.

Castles were an expensive undertaking which could take years to finish. A master mason, who was, in effect also the architect, led a team of hundreds of skilled workers ranging from carpenters to blacksmiths and dyke specialists to common laborers. The transportation of materials was the highest cost of all so the proximity of a local quarry was an advantage.

The earliest form of fortified camp was a simple wooden palisade, perhaps with earthworks, surrounding a camp (ringworks), sometimes with a permanent wooden tower in the center. These had been common since Roman times and remained little-changed for centuries. Then, stand-alone wooden towers became a feature of defenses in northwest France from the 9th and 10th centuries. These structures evolved into the more sophisticated motte and bailey castles, which were especially common in France and Norman Britain from the 11th century.

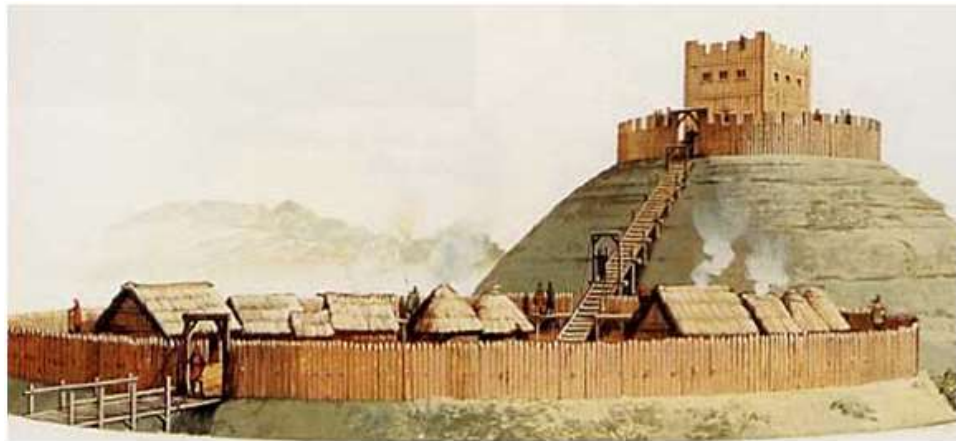


Figure 1 Motte and Bailey Castle

The castles consisted of a wooden wall, perhaps built on an earth bank, encircling an open space or courtyard (bailey) and a natural or artificial hill (motte) which had a wooden tower built in the center of its flattened top, sometimes surrounded by its own wooden palisade. The tower ranged from a mere lookout tower or firing platform to the more substantial building used as a residence for the local lord. Some towers were built on stilts, presumably to save time and materials in their



Bailey

is a courtyard enclosed by a curtain wall. Baileys can be arranged in sequence along a hill (as in a spur castle), giving an upper bailey and lower bailey. They can also be nested one inside the other, as in a concentric castle, giving an outer bailey and inner bailey. Outer baileys could also be largely defensive in function, without significant buildings. In the concentric castles of the military orders, such as Krak des Chevaliers or Belvoir, the inner bailey resembled a cloistered monastery, while the outer bailey was little more than a narrow passage between the concentric enclosures. In general, baileys could have any shape, including irregular or elongated ones, when the walls followed the contour lines of the terrain where the castle was sited. Their layout depends both on the local topography and the level of fortification technology employed, ranging from simple enclosures to elaborate concentric defenses. In addition to the gradual evolution of more complex castle plans, there are also significant differences in regional traditions of military architecture regarding the subdivision into baileys.

construction and to make them more difficult to scale. The motte was sometimes connected to the bailey by a type of bridge, but most had steps cut into their sides.

The roughly circular mottes, rising to a height of anywhere from 15-30 feet and ranging from 80-330 feet across, were built using the earth excavated from the ditch or utilized natural rises or perhaps even more ancient fortification sites. There is archaeological evidence that some mottes were built up after the tower had been built and so were used to protect the base of the structure and/or make it more stable rather than give it extra height. Additional solidity was provided in some mottes by riveting in timber stakes or facing them with wooden boards or stone slabs.

Motte and bailey castles, being made from timber and earthworks were relatively quick to build, taking only a few weeks or months, a distinct advantage in hostile and newly-conquered territories where recently subjugated tribes might launch revenge attacks on their new overlords or, at the very least, proved reluctant to be conscripted into their construction. In addition, this type of fortification did not require any particularly skilled labor or stones to be quarried and transported, which dramatically reduced their cost of construction.

As they were largely made of wood, motte and bailey castles were susceptible to fire during an attack, as can be seen in various scenes from the Bayeux Tapestry, which depicts the 11th-century Norman conquest of Britain and events leading up to it. Motte and bailey castles did not resist the weather well either, with mounds and timber structures degrading over time and even causing the collapse of towers. For these reasons, more permanent stone castles, despite their huge expense and the years needed to build them, were commissioned as a safer, longer-lasting, and more comfortable residence by those who could afford them.

As castle fortification design developed, motte and bailey castles were adapted to new needs and technologies of warfare. An outer wall was built of stone on top of the motte, and it is then known as a shell keep. Finally, by the 12th century, the main central tower also came to be built of stone, but not usually on the motte itself as that was not stable enough to use as a foundation for such a heavy structure. In many cases, the bailey became more fortified and more important than the motte, which was sometimes reduced in size or even built over.



Figure 2 Restormel Castle, Cornwall, England – example of shell keep

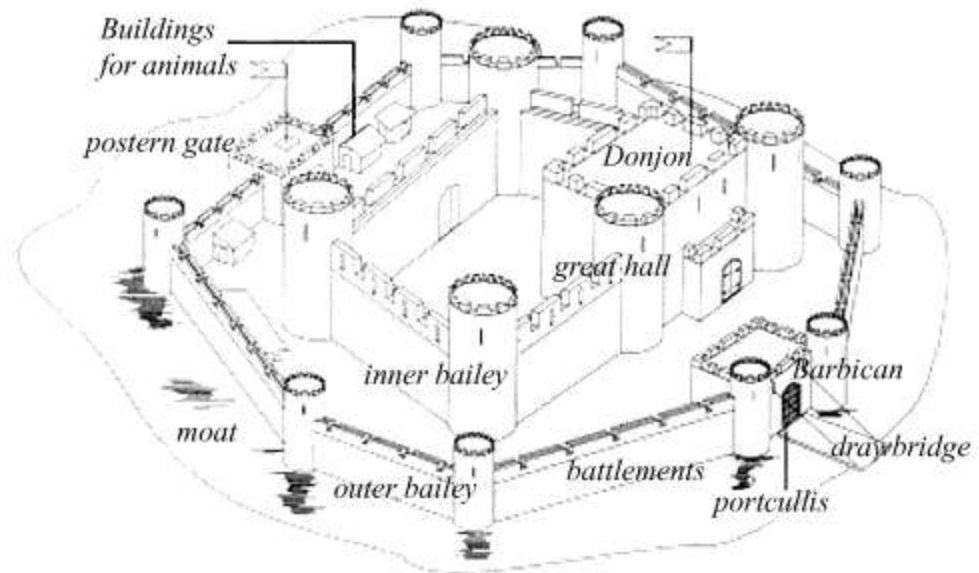
Moat Myths

Water moats were rare. If the castle's occupants did fill it with water, it likely would have quickly become a nesting site for bugs, been covered with algae, and simply turned into a putrid liability more dangerous to those inside than any invasion. A notable advantage of a water-filled moat was a reserve of water to put out fires, as well as a supply of eels and fish to eat. Historians believe that a story told by 19th-century politician Benedetto Croce is responsible for the crocodile myth. According to him, a seaside castle kept prisoners in its moat, and night after night, prisoners kept disappearing. Guards thought they might be escaping and posted an overnight watch. Instead of learning how the prisoners escaped, they watched in horror as a crocodile emerged from the sea and dragged an unfortunate soul away. Instead of slaying the croc, soldiers used him as an executor of justice. Though legends vary the origin of the toothy tyrant, one claims it was the work of Queen Joanna II. Joanna, who was rumored to have a strong appetite for romance, supposedly went through a number of young lovers. When she was done with them, however, she would dump them in a pit under her castle in Naples to be eaten by a giant African crocodile. This story is recognized as a myth, though Joanna's lovers were, in some cases, stabbed to death or beheaded. When experts were touring the passages beneath the castle, they found nothing but the mummified remains of a cat. Moreover, a cold-blooded reptile likely would have never survived a winter in European climates.

Features of a Castle

The typical features of a medieval castle were:

- **Moat** - a perimeter ditch with or without water
- **Barbican** - a fortification to protect a gate
- **Curtain Walls & Towers** – (battlements) the perimeter defensive wall
- **Fortified Gatehouse** - the main castle entrance
- **Keep** (aka Donjon or Great Tower) - the largest tower and best stronghold of the castle
- **Bailey or Inner Ward** (courtyard) - the area within a curtain wall.



Moat

An artificial ditch or moat was dug to surround the entire castle complex and could be filled with water permanently or temporarily during attack in some cases. As creating a moat was a huge undertaking, the presence of natural rises and depressions were important factors in choosing where to build the castle in the first place. The earth or stone excavated while preparing the moat could be used to build up the mound on which the castle would be subsequently built. The moat was made deep enough to impede attackers on horse, foot or equipped with siege towers. The sides were steep and could be riveted with wooden stakes to increase their slipperiness. Stakes might also be placed in the bottom to further impede crossing. If filled with water, only a few feet depth was required to obstruct the enemy and make them more vulnerable to missiles fired from the walls above.

Barbican

The barbican was a defensive fortification built to protect potential weak spots like a gate. Typically consisting of a short stretch of fortified wall, perhaps forming an echelon form, it allowed the defenders to ward off a direct attack on the wall or gate proper. The barbican could be protected by covering fire from the towers behind it and was sometimes surrounded by its own wall and/or ditch (with accompanying drawbridge or swing bridge) when it was known as a courtyard barbican. A second type was the passageway barbican which was similar to a fortified corridor leading from a gateway outwards. By the mid-13th century, barbicans were set more distant from the outer wall, at an angle from a gate and incorporating a 90-degree turn within them (between the entrance and exit bridges) to further impede access to the castle proper.

Curtain Walls and Towers

Walls surrounding the castle proper presented a formidable challenge to attackers. If the foundations were not of rock then they had to be specially prepared to bear the tremendous weight. The most common method was to dig a trench wider than the width of the wall and fill it with rammed stone rubble. Alternatively, oak piles could be driven into the soil to make it more stable. Walls varied in thickness, but an average seems to have been around 8 feet. Some were thick enough to contain passageways or murals. Most walls were made of two layers of dressed stones covering a rubble and mortar core. To prevent undermining and make their scaling more difficult both walls and towers could be built on a sloped plinth or a sloped protective curtain (spur) was later added. This slope could also prove useful if projectiles were thrown down on the enemy as they tended to bounce off at unpredictable angles.



Figure 3 Curtain wall and towers at Beaumaris Castle

With a parapet of crenellations (aka battlements) along the top of the walls, defenders could hide behind the raised parts of the wall (merlons) if necessary and then fire their arrows and crossbows through the lower part (crenels), minimizing their exposure to enemy missiles. Crenels might also be protected by hinged

wooden shutters which could be lowered when an archer wanted to fire an arrow. Walls had raised internal platforms for defenders to walk along while the internal side of the wall was usually left open in case they were breached and were used to launch further attacks on the inner fortifications.

Towers were added to walls so that the defenders could fire down onto the enemy from multiple angles. Towers evolved from square to D-shaped (1180s onwards) and then circular in form, which gave a greater range of fire and eliminated the corner blind spots. Projecting towers gave additional firing possibilities on the enemy as they tried to either scale or undermine the walls. Circular towers were also more structurally stable and better resisted attempts to collapse them either by undermining or picking out stones with tools (corners being a favorite target for sappers). Curved towers had an additional advantage of better deflecting artillery missiles such as heavy stones. If the enemy did manage to climb one section of the wall, then the towers provided a refuge for the defenders from where they could continue to fire their arrows. Archers were able to fire through narrow vertical slits in the stonework which widened on the inside to give a better field of fire. Later, a small horizontal slit was added to further increase the firing range.



Gatehouse

Prison was built in 1370 as the gatehouse of Westminster Abbey. It was first used as a prison by the Abbot, a powerful churchman who held considerable power over the precincts and sanctuary. It was one of the prisons which supplied the Old Bailey with information on former prisoners (such as their identity or prior criminal records) for making indictments against criminals. While he was imprisoned in the Gatehouse for petitioning to have the Clergy Act 1640 annulled, Richard Lovelace wrote "To Althea, from Prison", with its famous line, "Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage." Other notable prisoners included Giles Wigginton, Puritan cleric and controversialist, was imprisoned for 2 months around 1584, for refusing to take an oath. Sir Walter Raleigh was held here the night before he was beheaded in Old Palace Yard, Westminster on October 29, 1618. The Gatehouse prison was demolished in 1776. On its site, in front of the Abbey's Great West Door, is the Westminster scholars' Crimean War Memorial.

As castle design evolved, another, interior circuit of walls became a common feature - the concentric walled castle. Attackers had to breach two walls, and if they did get through the outer wall, they were extremely vulnerable to fire from the even higher inner wall when crossing the space (ward) between the two lines of defense. Underground tunnels were sometimes excavated to link the two sets of wall and provide an escape route to outside the castle or a sally port which defenders could use to turn the tables and attack the attackers from behind.

Fortified Gatehouse

The main gate of a castle was potentially one of its weakest points, and for this reason, gates gained more and more protective features over time. Twin towers were built from the end of the 12th century with the gate tucked between them and recessed. The gate itself was protected by a heavy wooden door and a portcullis (or even two) - a metal and wooden grid which could be lowered to block access. There might be a drawbridge, too, which could be raised by chains or, in the quicker version, swung 90 degrees, which meant the enemy had to negotiate a ditch or water-filled moat before they got to the actual doorway. Additional defensive measures included 'murder holes' (machicolations) - holes in projecting battlements above the entrance gate through which missiles or burning liquid could be thrown. Similarly, a water chute allowed the defenders to douse any fires the attackers set against the vulnerable wooden gate door.

Over time, as gatehouses became remarkable strong points, rather than weak points, they were even used as residences, particularly by the castle's constable - he who was in charge of its daily management. Some gatehouses also had dungeons under them and rooms in the upper floors for more honored prisoners who were being kept for ransom. A chapel, too, might be incorporated into the gatehouse. Larger castles might have a second fortified gate (typically on the opposite side of the circuit wall from the main gate) and one or more very small gates or posterns for single-person access in emergencies.

Keep

The keep, located within a courtyard and surrounded by a curtain wall, was the heart of a medieval castle. The term 'keep' may be applied to three different castle structures:

Shell Keep - where the wood palisade on the top of a motte and bailey castle was converted into stone.

Hall Keep - was a low building while the tower keep or donjon could have three or more floors and be topped by turrets and battlements. With its extra thick walls and protected entrance, the keep was generally the safest place in a castle during the siege warfare of the 11th and 12th century. Inside the largest building a person in the Middle Ages likely ever saw in their lives was the Great Hall, castle chapel, and residential quarters.

Tower Keep - expensive and slow to build, tower keeps were steadily replaced from the mid-13th century by larger round towers in the circuit wall which were designed to prevent the enemy from ever entering the castle courtyard or bailey. As a lasting testimony to their integral strength, many tower keeps still survive today across Europe, where very often the rest of the castle buildings have long since disappeared.



Figure 4 Carrick Castle Keep, Carrickfergus, Co Antrim



Medieval Fires

Great fires have ravaged the earth throughout recorded history, from the days of the Romans, through the Medieval Period and into modern times. The homes of peasants, shops and bridges were constructed using highly flammable building materials including straw, wattle & daub and wood. While wood played a role within grander structures built for religious purposes such as cathedrals, or manors and castles belonging to upper classes and nobility, they also incorporated far more fire resistant materials such as slate tiled roofs, and stone was predominantly the main structural component. However, despite the dwellings of richer Medieval classes using more fire resistant construction materials, cathedrals, churches, manors and castles nevertheless still burned during the Middle Ages.

As with any building, the weak spot of a castle keep was the entrance, and so this was often accessed by a staircase going directly to the first floor (i.e. above the ground floor). This staircase could be removed if necessary in early castles, and later it was permanent but protected by its own passageway and towers added on to the side of the keep (a forebuilding). The forebuilding was sometimes separated from the keep by a drawbridge, portcullis, and ditch. A huge barred door was the last but still formidable obstacle to attackers who managed to get that far. Even if soldiers got inside the keep, they had to fight their way up the narrow spiral staircases to each succeeding floor, sometimes having to cross an entire floor to reach the next level's staircase.

Roofs were usually of wood and steeply angled. The outer roof surface was protected by shingles, tiles, slates, thatch, or lead sheeting. Wood or lead-lined drainage channels, drainpipes, and projecting stone spouts ensured rainwater did not accumulate or damage the stonework of the building.

Typically, the basement of the keep was used for the storage of foodstuffs, arms, and equipment. There was usually a deep well to provide drinking water, which could be supplemented by rainfall captured and directed into a cistern. On the ground floor were the kitchens and sometimes stables. The first floor typically contained a Great Hall for banquets and audiences. This was a room designed to impress and so often had a beautiful wooden beam ceiling or impressive stone vaults, large windows (opening onto the safe interior side of the castle), and a grand fireplace. On this floor, too, and perhaps the floor above as well, were private chambers and usually a chapel. The top floor, sometimes called the solar or 'sun room' because it was safe enough to have bigger windows, was for an uncertain purpose. Heating was provided by fireplaces and portable braziers while windows would have had wooden shutters to keep in the heat when required as glass was rare.

While tower keeps continued to be built into the last decades of the 12th century, this was now uncommon unless in places of great unrest such as in Ireland and the Welsh borders. As castle designers now preferred bulky round towers set within the curtain wall itself, a tower keep became redundant as it was hoped the enemy never breached the outer wall.

Another factor in the decline of tower keeps was the arrival of bigger and more accurate cannons from the 14th century. Many castles were adapted for their own batteries of cannons such as making arrow-slit windows wider for the barrels to go through. More significantly for the tower keep, a cannon could not be fired effectively when angled downwards, and so many castle walls and towers were reduced in height. Finally, castle owners were now looking for greater comfort rather than defensive strength, and so the high towers with limited floor space gave way to lower, more expansive buildings which could accommodate more spacious private accommodation.



Groom of the Stool

was the most intimate of an English monarch's courtiers, responsible for assisting the king in excretion and ablution. It is a matter of some debate as to whether the duties involved cleaning the king's bottom, but the groom is known to have been responsible for supplying a bowl, water and towels and also for monitoring the king's diet and bowel movements and liaising with the Royal Doctor about the king's health. The appellation "Groom of the Close Stool" derived from the item of furniture used as a toilet. It also appears as "Grom of the Stole" as the word "Groom" comes from the Old Low Franconian word "Grom". In the early years of Henry VIII's reign, the title was awarded to court companions of the king who spent time with him in the privy chamber. These were generally the sons of noblemen or important members of the gentry. In time they came to act as virtual personal secretaries to the king, carrying out a variety of administrative tasks within his private rooms. The position was an especially prized one, as it allowed unobstructed access to the king.

Bailey

In the inner bailey or courtyard, besides the keep, there could be several other buildings such as granaries, workshops (for blacksmiths, carpenters, weavers and potters), a buttery (for wine and beer storage), stables, secondary accommodation, and perhaps a space for hunting dogs and birds if in a bigger castle. These structures were built using stone or more simply with wattle and daub walls and thatch roofs. To ensure a greater self-sufficiency in times of siege, there were gardens and space for poultry and livestock within the protection of the bailey. Larger castles also had a secondary chapel here, too.

Toilet

The medieval toilet or latrine, then called a privy or garderobe, was a primitive affair, but in a castle, one might find a little more comfort and certainly a great deal more design effort than had been invested elsewhere. Practicality, privacy, and efficient waste disposal were all considered and, even today, one of the most prominent and easily identifiable features of ruined medieval castles is the latrines which protrude from their exterior walls.

Medieval toilets, just as today, were often referred to by a euphemism, the most common being 'privy chamber', just 'privy' or 'garderobe'. Other names included the 'draught', 'gong', 'siege-house', 'necessarium', and even 'Golden Tower'. Garderobe later came to mean wardrobe in French, but its original meaning was likely just any small cupboard or room and, as space was at a premium in a castle, the toilets were never any bigger than absolutely necessary.

Viewed from the interior, the toilet was set back in a recess or within a mural chamber (a passage within a wall) but not all were given the luxury of a wooden door. A short narrow passageway sometimes led to a toilet, often with a right-angle turn for greater privacy. Pairs of toilets, separated by a wall, were not uncommon and these might share the same waste chute. The chamber of the castle's lord often had a private latrine but even he had, like everyone else, a chamber pot if needed. The castle's priest might also be one of the lucky few to have an *en-suite* toilet for his own chamber. Another sure place to find a castle toilet was in the corner of the Great Hall where audiences and banquets were held.

The toilet seat was made of a wooden bench covering the shaft hole in the masonry. The wood was usually cut with a rectangular or keyhole aperture. Hay, grass, or even moss were used as toilet paper. Toilet hay is referred to by medieval writers, albeit indirectly. Jocelin de Brakelond, the 12th-century English monk, recounted the story that a fire had almost broken out in the Abbey of Bury St. Edmonds when a candle had burned dangerously close to the hay in one of the abbey's privies.

Some toilets had a window to let in fresh air, which for the same reason was not shuttered like other windows of a castle. The floor may have been scattered with rushes and aromatic herbs and flowers, just as the Great Hall of the castle was, to deter vermin and offer a more pleasant fragrance than the users could provide. Walls were sometimes whitewashed with a coating of lime-plaster which maximized the light coming from the small window and because lime kills off bacteria.

The toilet was cleaned either by a simple bucket of water thrown down the shaft or by diverting the wastewater from the kitchen sinks. More rarely, rainwater was diverted from gutters above the latrine which might also be collected into a cistern and then periodically opened to flush the toilet shaft. Despite these refinements, there can be no doubt that a castle toilet stank to high heaven. Indeed, it was not uncommon to hang clothing near latrines as the pungent ammonia fumes helped to kill mites.

Triangular urinals were built into some tower walls so that defenders did not have to leave their post for very long. An example is to be found in the mural passage at Orford Castle in Suffolk, England, built in the second half of the 12th century. It seems that even such basic human activities were considered by architects to provide the best possible defense of the castle against all comers in all situations. Intriguingly, at Castle Rising in Norfolk, England, built in the mid-12th century, there are two toilets next to each other but in separate rooms, one with a toilet and one with a urinal which might perhaps be evidence of a separation of the sexes.

Great Hall

The Great Hall was the architectural centerpiece of a medieval castle's interior and functioned as the social and administrative hub of the castle and its estates. With everyone dining and sleeping in the hall in its early days, the room evolved to become the imposing host of banquets and courts. Beautifully decorated, well-lit and the largest indoor space most people would ever witness, the Great Hall was the perfect means for a noble to display both their power and generosity to the rest of local society.

Most early Great Halls were located in the safest part of the castle on the first floor (above the windowless ground floor) of a castle's tower keep, but they might also occupy a floor within a lower building in the castle's bailey or courtyard. The primary function of a Great Hall was as a place to hold official audiences, to host the court which decided local legal matters, and to provide an elegant setting for banquets.

The early Great Halls were not only a symbolic center of the community but also a very real one as all the castle residents ate and slept in it. Even the castle lord and lady slept in the hall behind a curtain at one end. Sometimes the lord and his family slept in the gallery of the hall's second floor, from where they could also spy on the guests below through concealed 'squint' holes disguised in artworks. From the 12th century, as castles grew in size and accommodation became available elsewhere, the castle's owners had their own entirely separate chambers while the staff slept in the cellar and attic spaces.

The lord's supposed superiority to everyone else who visited the Great Hall was reinforced by the presence of his coats of arms on the walls, the liveried servants who wore his badge and the presence of a group of trumpeters blasting out from an upper gallery. Thus the hall became a suitable environment for such ceremonies as knighting a loyal retainer, dispensing the right to wear the lord's badge to a man-at-arms, granting the inheritance of land to a tenant knight, or giving out gifts to the lower classes.



Figure 5 Great Hall at Hampton Court

Designed to impress, the Great Hall usually had a beautiful wooden beam ceiling or impressive stone vaults, decorative stonework, and large windows (opening to the safe interior side of the castle) which gave plenty of light. The presence of light was itself an impressive feature in medieval times, and it was made the most of by adding seats to the windows. Wall decorations might include weapons, wall hangings (useful for keeping out drafts besides their aesthetic purpose), and plaster walls which might be decorated with red lines to imitate ashlar stonework or carry murals of daily life such as hunting and gardens or scenes of chivalry such as episodes from the legends of King Arthur.

The flooring was usually of beaten earth, stone or plaster, when on the ground floor, and, if on an upper floor, made using timber which might then be tiled. Despite the use of textiles for wall-hangings and benches, carpets were not common in northern European halls until the 14th century. Floors were usually covered with rushes and sprinkled with a good dose of herbs and flowers to improve the smell of the hall and deter vermin. These plants included basil, chamomile, lavender, mint, roses, and violets.

A large hearth in the center of the room was a persistent feature of ground floor Great Halls, despite the obvious problem of the smoke they created. The hearth usually took a square, circular, or octagonal form and was edged with stones or tiles. A clay cover was put over the hearth at night to prevent any fire mishaps. In an effort to reduce the smoke accumulation, some architects added a flue to one or more of the windows. Other options included building ventilation holes through the roof covered by a terracotta figure or a louvre - a small structure like a lantern that could sometimes turn with the wind - which was opened or closed using a cord.

When Great Halls were built on the first floor, the hearth was moved up against a wall and given a stone hood to capture the smoke better. Smoke was driven out through a hole in the wall, usually through an outside supporting buttress. Eventually, by the start of the 13th century a fireplace with a chimney built into the wall had taken over as the best means to heat the room, but even a large one - some halls measured up to 60 feet in height - was usually not sufficient to heat all of the room. Later halls, therefore, often had several fireplaces. Fireplaces increased in efficiency when it was discovered that using tiles at the back not only protected the stone from fire damage but helped to reflect the heat back into the room.

Rooms and corridors branched off from the hall and led to the kitchens, pantry, and private chambers. There might also be a wooden staircase along two walls which led up to private chambers on the next floor. The corridor which led off to the service rooms was usually concealed behind an ornate wooden screen and often lined with shelving. The main entrance to the hall was monitored by an usher who controlled who came and went, especially after the accessibility to the lord became a privilege in itself. This was again covered by a wooden screen with entrances at either side so that draughts were minimized. A gallery for musicians was often built above this screen.

By the end of the Middle Ages, as castles became less defensive fortresses and more private residences, their owners looked for a greater comfort and privacy than could be offered by the Great Hall. The castle owners preferred, instead, to take their meals in the small private chambers known as “withdrawing rooms”, away from the prying eyes, noise, and draughts of the Great Hall. For this reason, by the 17th century, the Great Halls had eventually evolved into the servants’ hall of great houses.

After the 16th century, castles declined as a mode of defense, mostly because of the invention and improvement of heavy cannons and mortars as noted above. This artillery could throw heavy cannonballs with so much force that even strong curtain walls could not hold up. Eventually, the medieval castle gave way to fortified cities (almost a reversal of history) and forts (like those seen in Colonial times in North America). Instead of high brick or stone walls, these forts had broad earthen ramparts with wooden or stone palisades on top. The idea was that thick layers of dirt would absorb the impact of cannon fire. Also, these fortifications were easier and faster to build than castles.

Glossary

Alure (Wall Walk) - The walkway along the higher and interior part of a wall which often gives access to the higher floors of towers within the wall. Typically protected by battlements.

Apse - A semicircular projecting part of a building, usually vaulted.

Arcade - An area of columned arches.

Arrow Loop - The narrow window of a wall or tower through which arrows and crossbow bolts could be fired. Usually a vertical slit, sometimes with a short horizontal slit to improve sighting.

Ashlar - Regular-shaped blocks of dressed masonry set in even horizontal rows.

Bailey (Ward) - The courtyard of a castle containing the principal buildings, including sometimes a tower keep, which may be surrounded by its own fortified wall.

Ballista - A large, fixed crossbow which fired large wooden bolts or iron-headed bolts. Used by both attackers and defenders.

Barbican - A short stretch of fortification outside the castle, especially used to provide extra protection for gates.

Barrel Vault - An arched vault between two walls.

Bartizan - A turret which overhangs the wall below. Common at the juncture of two walls, they provide extra defensive visibility.

Bastion - An angular projection from a curtain wall which gives an improved range of defensive fire.

Batter - The angled additional base to a wall or tower which increases the difficulty in climbing or dismantling the wall by attackers. See Talus.

Battlements - The crenellated top row of stones on a wall or tower. The merlons (raised section) and crenets (gaps) alternate to provide both cover and a line of fire for defenders.

Belfry - A mobile siege tower used to attack castles but sometimes also used by defenders.

Berm - The narrow area between the outer wall and its protective ditch or moat.

Blind Arcade - A row of false arches added to decorate a wall.

Boss (Keystone) - The central stone in a vault, often with decorative carving.

Burgus - An area of settlement connected to a castle by encircling earthworks.

Buttery - A room used to store drinks, especially wine, beer, and ale.

Buttress - A stone support of a wall, needed when the wall carries a roof or vault, or to provide extra defensive stability against dismantling or bombardment by attackers.

Chamber - A private room in a castle, for example, a bedroom.

Chemise - A wall which closely surrounds a keep.

Cistern - A tank for capturing rainwater and/or storing water.

Corbel - A stone which projects from a wall to support a roof timber or stone arch.

Countermine - A mine dug by the defenders in order to intersect and/or collapse the mine of the attackers.

Counterscarp - The outer slope of a ditch or moat.

Crenellations - The top row of stones on a wall or tower which alternate between merlons (raised sections) and crenets (gaps) to provide both cover and a line of fire for defenders.

Crenet (Embrasure) - The gap between raised sections (merlons) in the battlements of a wall or tower.

Cruck - The curved timber which is set in the ground to support a roof or wall.

Curtain Wall - The outer wall of a castle.

Demesne - The lands owned by and farmed in the name of the castle owner but which were not usually leased.

Donjon - The medieval name for a tower keep.

Drawbar - The large horizontal beam of wood used to lock a gate.

Drawbridge - A short hinged bridge which can be raised to block a gateway or lowered to cover a section of the moat. Usually operated via a chain and winch.

Drum Tower - A round tower set within a curtain wall.

Earthworks - Raised areas of earth on which palisades and walls were built in early castles. May also refer in general to such defensive structures as moats.

Embrasure - The splayed opening in a wall for an arrow loop or ordinary window which gives a defender room to stand and maneuver. Also an alternative name for a crenet.

Enceinte - The area enclosed by a fortified wall of a castle or town.

Fictive Masonry - The lines painted on a wall to make it resemble ashlar masonry. Often used on chamber interiors using red paint.

Forebuilding - The structure immediately in front of the tower keep which protects its entrance.

Gable - The triangular section of a wall between the sloping roofs of two adjoining buildings.

Garderobe - Another name for the latrine or toilet.

Gatehouse - The structure which developed to better protect gates, eventually having twin round towers and other defenses like a drawbridge and portcullis.

Great Hall - The main reception and dining room of the castle. Usually with an impressive beam or vaulted ceiling and enormous fireplace.

Hall Keep - A keep which does not have the height of a tower keep.

Hoarding - Wooden structures added to the top of walls and towers to provide a covered walkway and a secure place for defensive fire. Sometimes they could be removed during peacetime.

Keep - The term used from the 16th century to describe the main residential building of a castle. Known also as a great tower or donjon. They may be of only a few stories (Hall Keep) or four or more floors (Tower Keep).

Keystone (Boss) - The central stone in a vault, often with decorative carving.

Latrine - Toilet or garderobe, usually with a waste shaft emptying directly outside the walls.

Lintel - The large horizontal stone or beam above a doorway or window.

Machicolation (Murder Hole) - A hole in the projecting overhang of a wall or tower through which missiles may be dropped on the enemy and through which the base of the wall can be monitored.

Mangonel - A stone-throwing catapult which was powered by the torsion of ropes. Used by both defenders and attackers.

Merlon - The raised section which alternates with crenets (gaps) in the battlements of a wall or tower.

Mine - A tunnel dug under a castle by attackers to cause a partial collapse of it.

Moat - A ditch which encircles or partially encircles a castle's walls. They may be dry or filled with water (temporarily or permanently) and have wooden stakes driven into their sides to make them more slippery and so more difficult to climb by attackers.

Motte & Bailey Castle - An early type of castle with an artificial or natural mound (motte) on which a tower is built with a courtyard (bailey) below, surrounded by a palisade and moat.

Mural Tower - A tower built into a curtain wall.

Mural Chamber - A small vaulted room built within a castle wall.

Mural Passage - A vaulted passageway which is built within the wall itself.

Murder Hole (Machicolation) - A hole in the projecting overhang of a wall or tower through which missiles may be dropped on the enemy and through which the base of the wall can be monitored.

Outworks - Those defensive arrangements outside the castle walls proper, for example, a moat or barbican.

Palisade - A wooden defensive wall.

Pantry - A room used to store food, especially bread, usually located near the Great Hall.

Parados - The low inner wall of a wall walk or alure.

Parapet - The raised top part of a wall, often with battlements, which offers some protection to defenders on the wall walk behind it.

Plinth - The lower projecting part of a wall or tower.

Portcullis - A grill made from wood, iron covered wood or purely iron which has a spiked base and is lowered to block a gate entrance. Usually raised and lowered via a chain and winch.

Postern Gate (Sally Port) - A small gate for pedestrians only which was used as a secondary entrance or emergency exit.

Rampart - An earth bank.

Ravelin - A triangular fortification structure set outside the curtain walls.

Rendering - The plaster covering of a stone wall, often lime-washed.

Revetment - A wooden or stone wall to protect one side of a moat or ditch.

Ringwork - An oval or circular earthwork with a bank and ditch which encloses domestic or other buildings.

Sally Port (Postern Gate) - A small gate for pedestrians only which was used as a secondary entrance or emergency exit.

Scarp - The inner slope of a ditch or moat or the edge of the earth platform on which a castle may be built to increase its height.

Screens Passage - The passageway which leads from the Great Hall to the service area.

Shell Keep - When the keep is built on an artificial or natural mound (motte) and surrounded by a stone circuit wall on the mound itself.

Solar Room - A private chamber within a tower keep, usually a high floor but of uncertain use.

Talus - The massive angled additional base to a wall or tower which increased the difficulty in climbing and dismantling the wall by attackers. Larger than a batter.

Tiltyard - The area used by knights to practice jousting, tilt being the wooden barrier which separates horsemen as they charge at each other.

Tower Keep - The main residential building of a castle consisting of many floors.

Tracery - Decorative patterned wood or stonework in a window frame.

Turning Bridge - An alternative to a drawbridge which swings on a central pivot so that the rear end lowers into a ditch or pit.

Turret - A small tower, sometimes added to the corners of a tower keep.

Vault - An arched ceiling made of stone.

Vice - A spiral staircase.

Wall Walk (Alure) - The walkway along the higher and interior part of a wall which often gives access to the higher floors of towers within the wall.

Ward (Bailey) - The courtyard of a castle containing the principal buildings, including sometimes a tower keep, which may be surrounded by its own fortified wall.

Wattle & Daub - The combination of clay or earth (daub) with a strengthening latticework of wood (wattle) which was used in buildings instead of more expensive stone. In a motte and bailey castle, the interior buildings would have been mostly of wattle and daub.

Window Seat - A seat set into the wall by a window which provides good light for such activities as reading and embroidery.

Wing-wall - A fortification wall that descends into a moat.