Historic England

Stone Castles

Introductions to Heritage Assets

Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to stone castles. Stone-built castles, mostly the defended residences of medieval lords, are amongst the best-known and most prominent of all ancient monuments and many, such as the Tower of London and Dover Castle, are major tourist attractions. A brief chronology and history of research are included along with descriptions of the asset type and its associations. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

Front cover
Scarborough Castle: the 12th century keep.
Bombardment in 1645 brought half down.

Introduction

Stone-built castles are amongst the best-known and most prominent of all ancient monuments and many, such as the Tower of London and Dover Castle, are major tourist attractions. At the other end of the scale are smaller or less well-preserved stone castles which, though they may have been important in their heyday, are now known to few.

Castles in the medieval period were the residences of lords; the massive and well-built masonry defences are often the best-preserved and most striking surviving elements of such sites, but a contemporary visitor would have noticed resemblances to non-fortified great houses. They were centres of political power and local administration, courts of justice and grand domestic houses. The largest, such as Kenilworth, were the palaces of great magnates, while the smallest were indistinguishable from fortified manor houses, the homes of minor lords; but they all shared the status of lordly residence.

Castles of the Norman Conquest were of earth and timber (see the introduction to Medieval Earthwork and Timber Castles). By the time these were upgraded with masonry most no longer had a primarily – or at least sole - military function, although some, like Dover, remained 'strongholds of the realm' for centuries. The main exceptions were castles within the lordships of the Scottish and Welsh Marches, power blocks that protected the borders and engaged in military and political activity beyond their own territories; their castles retained their military importance into the later 13th century, and many were attacked.

1 Chronology

The first stone castles were built in the 11th century, soon after the Norman Conquest (1066), and they continued to be built, re-built and extended over the following centuries. In that time castle design evolved (as described below) in response to military developments, architectural fashion, influences from abroad and changing social attitudes; this can be read in the fabric of surviving castles, even relatively poorly preserved ones. Castles are a major store of information about the changing ideas of the medieval centuries.

The castlellated form seems to have gone largely out of fashion by the 16th century as the spread of powerful artillery led to the development of squat blockhouse-like forts (see the Military Structures selection guide), although many castles continued in use, mainly as residences, for many centuries.

Surviving examples could be refortified or pressed into use in the Civil Wars of the mid-17th century, and some were at the centre of notable sieges. Many were slighted (part-demolished) in the aftermath of the War; this remains a poorly-understood phenomenon although Porter's *Destruction in the English Civil Wars* (1994) is a useful introduction. The means and extent of such destruction can vary enormously, as could the motives of those engaged in demolishing or adapting the structures. It can be very difficult to distinguish between primary slighting (traditionally identified as the partial demolition of parts of castles to render them incapable of defence), secondary damage and later decay and collapse, especially where the evidence for these processes has been summarily cleared away, but the surviving ruins form some of our most evocative and impressive monuments.

TIMELINE

Stone-built Castles

1000   1250   1500   1750   2000 AD
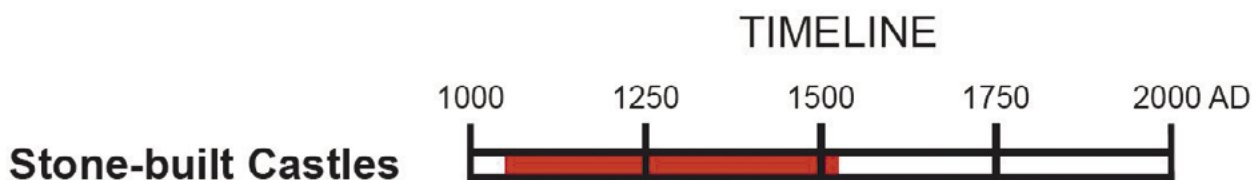
2 History of Research

Castles became the subject of historical enquiry almost from the moment they were abandoned, and the scale of their destruction in the mid-17th century prompted further interest and research. For some time, however, interest in them went little further than laments for their past glories. A growing interest in, and revival of, medieval architecture from the late 18th century prompted further study, and the work of historical novelists, notably Sir Walter Scott, widened interest in them considerably.

By the later 19th century a more scientific approach to their historic fabric was being developed by historians such as George Clark. Throughout the 20th century castle studies were a popular area of historical and archaeological research, attracting several great scholars, beginning with J H Round and Ella Armitage, and a huge literature was generated.

For most, the military aspects of castles were of the greatest importance (and this is reflected in the popular imagination where sieges are foremost – in reality few castles were ever besieged or witnessed much military strife at all) but in recent years attention has shifted to the social, political and symbolic roles of castles as seats of lordly power.

Many castles have been studied, surveyed and excavated, and many synthetic studies have been published; a wealth of information is now available.

3 Description

The heart of nearly any castle of the 11th to 13th centuries was the Great Tower (or 'donjon', often referred to in modern literature as the 'keep'). Usually square or rectangular in plan, though sometimes polygonal or round, this was the principal 'symbol of lordship', physically dominating its surroundings by its height, bulk and architectural brutalism (Figure 1). It would usually contain, on an upper floor, a presence chamber where the lord would sit to receive petitioners and dispense justice. The residence of the lord and his family might be here but would usually be supplemented by accommodation in other towers or buildings in the castle, usually comprising a hall and private chambers.

Figure 1
Richmond castle, North Yorkshire. The Great Tower, over 30 metres high, was begun by Earl Conan before 1171 and completed by Henry II.

The Great Tower would be attached to or surrounded by a curtain wall surmounted by battlements or 'crenellations', usually with an external ditch or moat, studded with corner and interval towers, and enclosing one, but more often two or more, wards or 'baileys'. The curtain wall was pierced by at least one gate contained within its own gatehouse, often with elaborate fortifications (including drawbridges and portcullises) and outworks, or barbicans, of its own. Often the gatehouse took on some of the role of the Great Tower, being the residence of the Constable (the officer in charge of the castle in the lord's absence) and containing a courthouse and chapel.

Within the wards were all the buildings needed for the administration and support of a large household and the other functions of the castle – not just accommodation but kitchen, brewhouse, bakehouse, stores, stables, workshops, armoury, mews (where hawks were kept), kennels and offices. There was typically at least one chapel, either a freestanding building or within a wall tower.

An alternative to the Great Tower was a circular structure known as a 'shell keep' (Figure 2); these were usually built around the summit of an earlier motte (castle mound), although they could also, as at Restormel (Cornwall), be built at ground level, possibly following the line of an earlier 'ringwork'. Surviving internal structures at Tamworth (Staffordshire) and Windsor (Berkshire) take the form of four ranges grouped around a central open courtyard, but the remains of a range built across the centre of the shell keep at Kilpeck (Herefordshire) show that other arrangements were possible. A shell keep, like a Great Tower, was part of a larger castle with curtain walls and other elements.

Figure 2
The late 13th century shell keep at Restormel
Castle, Cornwall.

Towards the end of the 13th century and for much of the 14th, the Great Tower declined in status and few new ones were built. Instead 'enclosure' castles with no dominant tower were built. The most sophisticated of these were 'concentric' castles, with the emphasis on closely-spaced double lines of curtain walls, where bowmen on the inner wall and its towers could cover defenders on the lower outer wall (Figure 3). This defence in depth was very effective, though no castle was ever impregnable to a really determined attacker.

Figure 3
A concentric castle, the Tower of London.

Figure 4
Bodiam, East Sussex. A small quadrangular castle of the later 14th century. How much this was intended as a defensible castle, rather than an old soldier's show-home, remains debated.

The castle retained its importance into the late medieval period, as a seat of lordship and political power base. New castles were built, often on an elaborate quadrangular plan and on a grand scale, as at Bodiam (East Sussex; Figure 4) and Bolton Castle (North Yorkshire). These castles had the symbols of military power – curtain walls, moats, and towers with arrow loops – but military needs were often sacrificed to the demands of more comfortable living, with large windows, and thinner walls allowing larger rooms. It could

Figure 5
Hopton, Shropshire: a small castle with a late 13th or early 14th century tower built in imitation of a Norman Great Tower.

be argued in such cases that castellation (the adornment of a house with battlements) is a form of architectural display appropriate to the lordly, political and dynastic aspirations or pretensions of the owner (Figure 5).

From the late 14th century onwards there was a revival of the Great Tower, with many elaborate new examples, such as Old Wardour (Wiltshire) or Tattershall (Lincolnshire) being built. Though these often contained deliberately old-fashioned elements, harking back to the glories of a heroic past, they were designed for comfortable living and grand entertaining rather than for military purposes (Figure 6). At Ashby de la Zouch (Leicestershire), prominent castellated elements including a great tower were added to an earlier, apparently unfortified manorial complex. But increasingly, from the 15th century great lords abandoned military architectural elements altogether and built grand houses round extensive courtyards, like Haddon Hall (Derbyshire) and Dartington Hall (Devon).

Figure 6
Goodrich Castle, Herefordshire. View from the barbican with the gatehouse, containing chapel and constable's quarters, in the foreground.

4 Associations

Timber castles are described in a separate Introduction, but there was little difference in form and function between the two types. Timber castles were often re-fortified in stone at a later date.

Some castles occupied existing enclosures, often very ancient ones such as hillforts or Roman forts; this was partly for practical reasons of siting, but partly also perhaps a symbolic appropriation of the significance of an ancient seat of power.

Churches or monastic houses were often founded near castles, symbolising the twin pillars of secular and religious power. Castles were sometimes built within existing towns but sometimes lords laid out new boroughs beside their castles to stimulate economic activity.

Castles were almost invariably provided with parks, stocked with deer and other game, for medieval lords were great hunters. Rabbit warrens were often established nearby to supplement the food supply. A hermitage within the park, often quite elaborate, as at Warkworth (Northumberland), could add to the rich symbolism of the castle's surroundings. Many castles were also provided with lakes and ponds, partly defensive, partly for the provision of fish and waterfowl, and partly for aesthetic reasons; they might also supply power to run a mill. The Great Mere at Kenilworth (Warwickshire), for example, fulfilled all of these needs. Aesthetic considerations also underlay adjacent gardens and pleasances, areas demarcated for feasting and other pleasures.

In other periods some of the military functions of castles were fulfilled by burhs, forts and artillery fortifications. Towerhouses became a popular form of fortified residence in the north of England, usually for landowners at a lower social level than castle owners. The more social purposes devolved upon the grand country house, while other functions were taken over by courthouses and prisons. In some cases, one of these functions could effectively take over a castle site, such as the prisons at Lincoln and Lancaster, or the court complex at York.

5 Further Reading

The best pocket introductions are The *Observer's Book of Castles* by Brian K Davison (1979) and *Medieval Castles* by Oliver Creighton and Robert Higham (2003).

Books by great scholars of a previous generation, such as R Allen Brown's *English Castles* (1970) or D Cathcart King's *The Castle in England and Wales* (1988), remain good value if a little old-fashioned and with heavy emphasis on castles' military aspects.

More recent works emphasising different aspects of the castle include Robert Liddiard's excellent *Castles in Context* (2005) and Charles Coulson's *Castles in Medieval Society* (2003), an historical study of great worth.

Stephen Porter's *Destruction in the English Civil Wars* (1994) is a valuable overview of the fate that befell many castles in the 1640s.

The contribution that excavation has made to castle studies is demonstrated by John Kenyon's *Medieval Fortifications* (1990).

The literature of the last half century is usefully drawn together in John Kenyon's *Castles, Town Defences and Artillery Fortifications in the UK and Ireland: a bibliography 1945-2006* (2008).

There are numerous local and regional studies of varying quality and many individual castles that are open to the public have guidebooks.

Some good recent studies of individual castles resulting from survey and excavation include David Austin, *Acts of Perception: A Study of Barnard Castle in Teesdale* (2007); Peter Ellis, *Ludgershall Castle Excavations* (2000); and Christopher Young, *Excavations at Carisbrooke Castle, Isle of Wight* (2000).

Historic England Research Reports include recent studies on Dunstanburgh, Framlingham, Hadleigh, Hopton and many other stone castles, (available via Historic England's website).

6 Where to Get Advice

If you would like to contact the Listing Team in one of our regional offices, please email: customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk noting the subject of your query, or call or write to the local team at:

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