The background is a detailed painting of a medieval castle, likely the White Tower of the Tower of London. The castle is constructed from light-colored stone and features multiple towers and battlements. In the foreground, a dirt courtyard is populated with several figures in period clothing. Two women in large, ornate dresses (one blue and red, the other pink and white) are seated on the ground. A man in a blue tunic stands nearby. Several dogs are scattered across the courtyard, and a small figure is visible in the lower right corner. The sky is a clear, pale blue with a few wispy clouds.

Ten Castles That Made Medieval Britain

By James Turner

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Cover images: *Warwick Castle, the East Front from the Outer Court* (1752),
painted by Canaletto,

Introduction

Some of my fondest childhood memories come from visits to castles; running across the ubiquitous grassy slopes and fields which so often seem to shelter them, timidly peeking around dark rough corridors, their old stone craggy and cave like, straining to gaze up at the soaring mountainous bulk of their walls. Screwing my eyes shut and trying to imagine what it was like in days long gone by, before their ruination, back into their glory where the hollow castles that dot the British landscape, thrived alternatively as the bastions or terrors of local communities. Of course, the answer is, often crowded, perpetually draughty and more than a little smelly. Granted I was the kind of little boy who would grow up to write a series revelling in ten of his favourite castles but I am hardly alone in my romance fuelled and wistfulness tinged enthusiasm for the Middle Ages. Indeed, the ongoing communications revolution has provided new means of access and outlets for medieval adherents. This has inexorably led the internally dynamic but impermeable orthodoxy of medieval studies to begin, fittingly enough, something of a renaissance as resources and the resultant familiarity with the Middle Ages percolates further than ever before, informing and then, as is always the case, being reinforced by trends in popular culture.

While the search for any definite truths in history, with the academic cycle of new theories and cascading revelations slowly settling only to be torn down by the next generation, may appear a Sisyphean task, the blurred edges of Medieval society, a culture as riotously diverse and sometimes even as wilfully contrary as our own, slowly gathers definition. When thinking about and conjuring the Middle Ages in our minds, few images loom through the murk of time as large in the public consciousness as the castle. Castles remain one of the last tangible links between ourselves and the culture from which, through an avalanche of literature, religion and societal mores, our own is partly derived. Curiously while there are a good number of castles still inhabited today, it can be in the ruined fossilised remains of one which can have the largest psychological impact. To know generation upon generation of people laboured and lived within now crumbling ruins is an unsettling thought, emphasising at once our underlying similarity to the people past and the vastly removed context we now find ourselves in.

As will become horribly clear as you go on, my roots in architectural history, even with regard to the Middle Ages, are rather shallow; although in cases where one or more of the featured castles contain architectural characteristics, either formative or distinct, I have striven to highlight and explain them as best I can. Rather, my real historical interest lies in poking the fabric of Medieval European political culture and examining the form and function of the intricate aristocratic networks of power composed of, but superseding, a mesh of interlocking geographic and dynastic affinities which, alongside the church, roughly lashed Europe together. The Castles covered here are judged to have had a transformative impact upon the shape and course of Medieval Britain and were chosen partly on the weight of the incredible and significant events that transpired in or around their walls but also partly on a thematic basis. The history of these Castles touches upon either a particular point in time or geographic location where an aspect of the continuously evolving and ever fractious political framework of the British Isles was undergoing some form of structural stress or change. It is hoped that in addition to learning about the history of some of Britain's most beautiful and notable castles, the reader will come away with some sense of the flavour and political tempo of the various eras of Medieval Britain. Castles are, after all, constructs of culture and politics just as much as they are of stone and mortar.

Bamburgh Castle

Windswept and interesting, the spectacle of the venerable old man of Northumbria, Bamburgh Castle, cannot help but stoke the imagination. Enthroned upon a rearing dais of sub-volcanic rock, the Castle rises rugged yet regal over the village that bears its name and the wild iron blue sea. Its roots reaching deep into the formless rolling fog of Britain's ancient past, Bamburgh Castle is built about the fossilised heart of a primordial kingdom. Emerging from the whirling, scrambling mêlée of shattered Sub-Roman Britain's dusk and the marauding Saxon dawn, ageless Bamburgh taken with fire and sword was the grain of sand around which a pearl coalesced.

The Kingdom of Northumbria, high water mark of Germanic conquest within Britain, was for a time the most powerful kingdom in the Saxon Heptarchy holding sway over all others. The soon Christianised Northumbrian monarchs from their seat, the mighty fortress of Bamburgh, oversaw a great flourishing of monastically driven scholarship and literature, transmuting a backwards kingdom on a half-forgotten and benighted island into one of Christendom's great strongholds of learning and culture. Yet all things come to an end, the dynasties and people of Northumbria changed under waves of settlement and conquest, its definitions became blurred until it was subsumed into the newly awakened England. While Northumbria was largely washed away, clinging onto the peripheries of peoples' identity, the craggy robust grandeur of Bamburgh Castle rose up to mark its passing, carrying and expanding its legacy down the ages.

The site of the current Castle, like many of Britain's most iconic and enduring fortresses, seems to have served as a stronghold almost since time immemorial; archaeological evidence pointing to the presence of an extensive Celtic settlement and fortification by the Votadini tribe. During their extended efforts to tame and reshape Britain, throughout their centuries of settlement and cultural conversion, the Romans constructed a watch tower on the site, a link in a vast chain of coastal defences. From these murky origins the history of the Castle swims into view when in 547 it was wrested from the grasp of the local Briton Kingdom, which had sprung up to fill the power vacuum caused by the withdrawal of Roman troops, by the evocatively titled Anglo-Saxon warlord Ida Flame-Bringer of Bernicia. Here Ida established the centre of his hard won domain which was to play a pivotal role in the Saxons ongoing and bitter struggle for dominance under the auspices of the royal inhabitants of Bamburgh.



Bamburgh Castle in 1808, by John Sell Cotman



Bamburgh Castle today - photo by Alex Brown

It was this foundation that turned Northumbria into one of Europe's premier centres of learning and a powerhouse of book production. As well as training such luminaries as the historian, the Venerable Bede and Emperor Charlemagne's adviser Alcuin who played a vital role in the Carolingian Renaissance, Northumbria's scholarly and literary revivals were transmitted across Europe. However, as Northumbria's power inevitably waned, losing their stranglehold over Mercia, the relatively isolated fortress at Bamburgh became superfluous to the expanding interests of the Northumbrian Kings, especially when compared to the rising star of York, now an important episcopal centre. Saxon domination of Northumbria came to an end in 867 with a full scale invasion by the much maligned Vikings under the Lothbrok brothers, Halfdan and the ominously and confusingly nicknamed Ivar the Boneless. In 993, after a long period of grudging co-existence with the neighbouring Viking settlers, Bamburgh was finally captured and sacked by the unabashedly stereotype embracing Vikings.

Following the Invasion of the Normans and the eventual dispossession of the Northumbrian Earl Morcar, together with remaining Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Danish noblemen, the newly minted King William experimented with numerous replacements in order to ensure his control of the wild northlands and impose a semblance of order on his followers and allies as they frenziedly and haphazardly sought to carve out their own holdings. The Normans, likely out of a mixture of tactical awareness and habit, constructed a castle at Bambrugh, on the site of the old Saxon fort and palace complex, which was then occupied by Aubery de Coucy, who the Conqueror installed as Earl after the harrowing of the north. The Conqueror, himself, visited the newly created Bamburgh during his preparations for a raid into Scotland. Aubery, perhaps tiring of the weather or the animosity of his new subjects, decided to return to Normandy, permanently forfeiting his English lands which were awarded to Robert de Mowbray, another Norman mercenary adventurer. Robert, one of the most powerful lords in the newly fused Anglo-Norman world and from a family that constituted a formidable network of power, had an eventful tenure as Earl rising up against the Conqueror's successor, William Rufus in 1088 only be pardoned before then slaying the invading King Malcolm III of Scotland and his heir at the Battle of Alnwick. Knowing when to call it quits though is a quality entirely absent from the psychological makeup of a Norman magnate and in 1095 Robert rebelled once again against King William Rufus who promptly retaliated by besieging Bamburgh Castle. Such was the formidable nature of the defences that the King was unable to breach them and the Castle only fell when Robert himself was captured, the King having struck a deal with Robert's wife, the formidable Matilda who had been serving as castellan throughout the siege, saying that if she surrendered he would refrain from gouging out her husband's eyes. The Castle was then taken over directly by the Crown and further fortified to better fulfil its role in the network of border defences.

Centuries later during the turmoil and confusion of the War of the Roses, Bamburgh Castle briefly served as a refuge for the Lancastrian King, Henry VI. Not coincidentally then, does Bamburgh Castle possess the rather dubious honour of being the first English castle reduced by cannon as the proto-Machiavellian Richard Neville, the Earl of Warwick – called King Maker by many for his role in championing and stage-managing the Yorkist cause – used his artillery train to batter down the walls in an attempt to capture the King.

In 1610, the Castle was granted by James I to the Forster family who had long acted as the Castle's custodians. However, operating a castle proved to be a crippling expensive endeavour and while they managed to retain it for several generations, Bamburgh Castle suffered from a degree of deterioration. The Castle changed hands several times after it was auctioned off following the death and bankruptcy of William Forster in 1701. Perhaps one of the noblest moments in the Castle's long history came in 1751 when it was purchased by Dr John Sharp who sought to create a bizarrely, ahead of its time, socialist utopia using the Castle as a focal point for a number of charitable endeavours. These included the opening of both a free hospital and school for the local residents, stock piling of food and fuel which could then be distributed to the needy, as well as the creation of a coastguard. The Castle was eventually bought in 1894 by a Victorian industrial magnate, Lord Armstrong. Lord Armstrong and his successors invested a vast amount of money in the full restoration and modernisation of the Castle; an investment which in terms of the cultural heritage of Britain continues to pay dividends.

The Castle while not amongst the largest or most complex of its ilk within the British Isles nevertheless boasts its own roguish good looks. Its evocative location and complementary design have even brought it to the attention of the fabled and golden land of Hollywood with the Castle appearing in a number of film and television productions such as Peter Glenville's 'Becket', two adaptations of 'Robin Hood' and perhaps in the lowest point of the Castle's long tattered yet glorious history, it featured in an episode of 'Most Haunted.' The aptly named Great Keep, the oldest part of the Castle standing today, was raised by Henry II in 1164 while the rest of the Castle spreads out around it enclosing entirely the outcrop upon which it is built. Its wide, occasionally layered battlements braced as they are against the sea are perfect for purposefully striding across before halting suddenly between ramparts to stare dramatically across the horizon, something I once saw in a movie and now find inexplicably therapeutic. Bamburgh Castle is awash with historical artefacts, together with treasures of great beauty and historic import which are proudly displayed throughout the Castle and its numerous exhibition rooms all of which do an admirable job in informing visitors of its long history. The King's Hall features a beautifully carved roof made from teak provided by the King of Siam and is packed with historical artefacts many of which predate the War of the Three Kingdoms. Tantalisingly for those so blessed, it is worth noting that the Hall is available for weddings.

The real jewel in the Castle's crown is the Archaeology Room featuring a host of artefacts from Bamburgh's Dark Age past, ably conveying both the significance and context of the various relics within. The two most prominent pieces in this collection are the Bamburgh Beast, a golden plaque dating back to the 7th century upon which is intricately carved the design of an unknown animal and the Bamburgh Sword. Originally excavated in 1961, this 7th century sword features what would have been at the time revolutionarily advanced metallurgical techniques. The sword has only recently been the subject of research due to the bizarre circumstances surrounding its retrieval. The archaeologist who originally found the blade left it in his garage, forgetting about it for some forty years!

A still beating heart of ancient kingdoms, standing tall as it always has above the endless crash of waves, Bamburgh Castle is one of those rare and blessed places where you can feel the breath of history on your neck.

Caernarfon Castle

A true citadel, Caernarfon Castle casts a long shadow – its meticulously calculated and formidable stonework heavy with the weight of symbolism. Raised by Edward I (and I wince to do this, Longshanks of Braveheart fame) in 1283. Perhaps more than any other castle found within the British Isles, Caernarfon embodies that most terrifying of a castle's aspects; a tool for the aggressive and utter domination of territory. Rising from a time of war, every beautifully designed facet of the castle is a manifesto for the imperialistic dreams of the English monarchy whose burning ambition laid a new narrative and shape upon the tumultuous relationship between England and its Celtic brothers.

That Caernarfon is sited in a place which represents a great strategic boon to anyone with designs to exert control upon northern Wales is an ancient piece of wisdom. The Romans in their own campaigns built a fortress named Segontium on the site of the modern town, a literal stone's throw away from the Castle. Likewise the Normans, in the high water mark of their initial spasmodic yet effective invasion of Britain, also built a castle on the site under the direction of the roguish gourmet, Hugh le Gros, Earl of Chester. Thirty years afterwards, this modest castle along with many of the bickering fiefdoms of the Norman robber barons fell to the resurgent and squabbling Welsh Princes. Like a middle aged couple trying something new, this up close and personal contact with their new neighbours had a profound effect upon the style and self-image of Welsh aristocracy. Indeed, until the eventually decisive intervention of Edward I, Anglo-Welsh relations with their frequent dynastic marriages, permeable cultural membrane and fluidic political formations, none of which did much to hinder frequent conflict, resembled nothing more than a grand Punch and Judy show. The same old joke played out again and again with gleeful violence.

From 1066 to the close of the 13th century medieval Wales was the wild west of the British Isles. Ireland was like a larger further away wild west but we'll ignore it for the sake of a concise metaphor. Into this swaying equilibrium came Edward I, a man with a dream. Like many dreams, once coaxed into the lucid world it was mad. Like the maddest of all dreams and happily for our metaphor it involved the notion of a manifest destiny. Inspired both by the legends of Arthurian romance literature and his less fictitious but no less influential Saxon and Norman ancestors, Edward, a martial King hardened by rebellion and crusade, sought to restore English power and hegemony in Britain. Prior to the great invasion of 1282, Edward had already fought a campaign in Wales comprehensively beating Llywelyn ap Gruffudd the greatest of the Welsh Princes in 1277 when the latter attempted to cling on to the high level of autonomy he had prospered upon under Edward's father, the inept Henry III. However, in large part due to the harsh peace treaty imposed by Edward and his



Caernarfon Castle - Photo by Nelo Hotsuma

determination to extend the reality of English royal authority across the border, as opposed to the largely nominal laissez faire overlordship of earlier Anglo Norman kings, Wales exploded into rebellion in 1282.

Although the English invasion struggled to gain traction in the early phases of the war, the tide began to turn when Llywelyn, the figurehead of the Welsh cause was killed at the Battle of Orewin Bridge. Taking advantage of his superiority in capital and manpower Edward launched another two pronged invasion of Wales in conjunction with his uncle, William de Valence, which finally succeeded in subduing the defenders. In this once and for all move breaking the power of the Welsh Princes, Edward had snuffed out the last remnants of the ancient Sub Roman British Kingdoms glorified as the heroes of the Arthurian tales he loved so much.

In order to safeguard the vast territories he had annexed in the war's aftermath, Edward embarked upon a program of castle building unprecedented in scale and artistry. Caernarfon is the crown jewel in a chain of strategically placed castles that include the likes of the illustrious Conwy and Harlech Castles. Caernarfon, alongside many of Edward's castles was designed and constructed (although luckily not single-handedly) by James of Saint George, a master builder from Savoy. It was also, like many of Edward's castles, a staggeringly expensive undertaking, drawing on vast quantities of material and skilled labour; the enterprise costing somewhere in the region of £25,000.

Edward, implacable though he was in his desire to absorb Wales and later Scotland, was far from adverse to a subtler longer term plan rather than stabbing anything that spoke Welsh to him. Thus when she fell pregnant, a presumably annoyed Queen Eleanor was packed off to the building site that was Caernarfon so that her child could be born in Wales, hopefully developing a politically useful Welsh affinity. On the 25th of April 1284 the future Edward II was born at the Castle and in 1301 the young Edward was created Prince of Wales, a position which it was envisaged would alleviate Welsh discontent and ease the transition to English rule by giving them an alternative centralised power with a strong Welsh influence. Remaining in royal hands and heavily garrisoned, the Castle was a centre of imposed English governance and a site of significant strategic importance which was targeted by a number of rebellions. The Castle was first sacked in 1294 while still under construction, although it was quickly recaptured. It was later unsuccessfully besieged in 1401, 1403 and 1404. During the War of the Three Kingdoms in 1642, the Castle remained in royalist hands. Even in an age of gunpowder and cannons, the Castle's ingeniously designed defences remained formidable, enduring three separate sieges by Parliamentary forces before finally surrendering in 1646. In the succeeding centuries while remaining in royal hands, the Castle was largely neglected although luckily significant restoration work was undertaken in the late 19th and early 20th century which is responsible for the Castle's excellent condition today. In 1911 King George V fittingly enough had his son invested as Prince of Wales at Caernarfon Castle; a tradition which continued with the current heir to the throne Prince Charles who was formally invested at the Castle in 1969.

Physically Caernarfon is a masterpiece, a supermodel of the castle world, all stark lines and inviting subtle curves. Its lofty and segmented polygonal towers and twin turreted gatehouses are a beautiful and technically impressive exemplar of a rare species. Its imposingly muscular curtain wall, which has often been compared to the great walls overlooking the golden horn of Constantinople, gives the Castle a distinct profile sheltering



A north-west view of Caernarfon Castle from 1749, by John Boyell

a pleasant grassy interior where once the great hall, kitchens and various outbuildings stood. The views from the towers are breath-taking, as is, I found, the experience of climbing to the top of them. The entire design of the Castle strongly evokes that of a Roman fort, a deliberate affectation on Edward I's part, likely inspired by the nearby ruins of Segontium. The Castle's Roman-ness was yet another item in Edward's toolkit of ideological weaponry, filling the Castle to the brim with connotations of monolithic dominance and a legitimacy derived from synchronicity with a presumed Arthurian past. Set against the water's edge, so that it could be resupplied by sea if necessary, the Castle stands in the heart of the town which bears its name. While, of course, only a small fraction of the modern town, the medieval town's walls remain remarkably intact forming a picturesque district packed with pubs, restaurants and antique shops which could easily give Bruges a run for its money.

While the Castle, which is open to visitors all year round, would be well worth visiting purely on the basis of its spectacle and physique it also contains a number of extremely well executed and informative exhibits. These include a comprehensive outline of the Castle's history with particular attention lavished upon the means and mechanisms of its construction, a multimedia examination of Caernarfon's native symbolism and place within Anglo-Welsh relations, as well as fittingly an exhibit upon the history of the title of Prince of Wales. In addition to these, the Castle is home to the fascinatingly in depth, if not a little labyrinthine, regimental museum of the Royal Welch Fusiliers detailing every step of their long gallant history and the lives of the generations who served within the Regiment with a venerated and treasured landside of material evidence and regimental relics.

Few if any castles in Britain are as outwardly impressive as Caernarfon. Caernarfon's true value, though, transcends the physical, it is a living avatar to a vision of Britain's position in the world whose shadow clings to us still. For all history enthusiasts it is a must see.

Dover Castle

Resolute and vigilant, Dover Castle yet stands guard above its ancient charge, the port of Dover. Of all the facets and functions that the castle performed in medieval society, Dover personifies its most commonly remembered and perhaps fundamental aspect, as a stronghold and place of security. Dover, its white cliffs gleaming in the sun and capped with rolling emerald green hills is an iconic image enshrined within the shared British consciousness. There is an old joke poking fun at the sometimes skewed self-importance of British culture featuring the newspaper headline 'Fog in Channel; Continent Cut Off'. Within the popular imagination, Dover, the physically closet harbour to the mainland, is the place where Europe ends and Britain with all its accompanying connotations and bus full of baggage begins. This is far from a new phenomena, indeed dictated by the whimsical realities of geography, it stretches back into the distant past, its precise meaning and significance has been interpreted and reinterpreted down the ages. Dover then taking up a hefty chunk of psychological real-estate, born from a very real strategic significance, is the gateway to England. For the Middle Ages and beyond, Dover Castle, born in the wake of a continental conquest and a cultural reorientation of England, controlled that gateway.

The current Castle, thanks to its enduring strategic relevance and the tactical utility of its location, has long been a beneficiary of habitation and fortification. Archaeological surveys and excavations have discovered evidence of Bronze and Iron Age settlements within the immediate area. Further, it is likely that the great earth mound and accompanying trough upon which the Castle stands are the artificially crafted bones of a great early Iron Age hillfort. Eventually when the Romans came to Britain and began to roll out an interlocking network of towns and roads across the country, amongst the first projects undertaken in the Emperor Claudius' conquest was the construction of a pair of lighthouses above the harbour. This established the harbour's importance as a trading post and place of transit for the fledgling Roman province; a powerful piece of symbolism guiding the way to the new Roman future; the lighthouses also came in handy for preventing incoming ships from hitting rocks and sinking. The largely intact ruins of the surviving lighthouse endure even today, standing at the foot of the Castle and are well worth a look. Built uncomfortably close to the lighthouse is the Saxon church of St Mary de Castro which was lavishly restored in the late 19th century and can be counted amongst the largest and best preserved Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical structures extant today. The Saxons who in their turn came to dominate England also built extensive fortifications in Dover which likely centred on the church.



Dover Castle - photo by Karen Roe / Flickr



The Great Tower of Dover Castle - Photo by Smudge9000 / Flickr

The first incarnation of Dover Castle proper was born in 1066 during the aftermath of the Battle of Hastings. William of Normandy invaded England with a motley coalition of loyal retainers, hungry neighbours and desperados in order to press his claim to the throne and make everyone filthy rich. Having defeated his principal rival, Harold Godwinson, at the Battle of Hastings, the experienced and battle hardened William moved cautiously to secure his lines of supply and communication. He attacked several points of potential Anglo-Saxon resistance, including Dover where having plundered the town and levelled what fortifications he found, his deeply imbedded central European warrior aristocratic instincts kicked in, compelling him to raise a castle upon the site. Dover was but one amongst a hundred hastily constructed during the Normans' first ragged surge over the British Isles, an ongoing and disjointed process involving as much negotiation, bullying and theft as it did open warfare, as the newly crowned King William attempted to exert his will upon both the Saxon majority and the predatory independence of his allies. It was, however, one of the few to last. The Norman Conquest dragged England and with it other sections of the British Isles to a new political and cultural orientation away from the Scandinavian world and down towards central and western Europe. Its new Kings and noblemen now also held land and titles upon the Continent to which they made frequent sojourns and the dynastic wars and rebellions of the new Anglo-Norman aristocracy were fought simultaneously on both sides of the Channel. Britain was now plugged into the vast political network of the still coalescing Europe in a way that it had never been before. In an age of great cross-channel magnates and ever widening communication with Europe, the importance of Dover harbour and the Castle that controlled it was on the rise.

Important since its inception, it was only during the reign of William's great grandson, Henry II, that Dover Castle came into glory. A living dynamo of a man, powered by seemingly inexhaustible supplies of drive and ambition, Henry II was as meticulous as he was energetic, throwing himself into the restoration of royal authority and power. A great lawmaker, Henry's refinement of the comparatively crude chimerical system of governance his ancestors had imposed over the complex Anglo-Saxon legal and tax system and the introduction of elements of this system into his continental territories made him stunningly, Scourge McDuck style, affluent. Henry was a one man medieval superpower. Through his mother, he inherited England and Normandy, through his father the County of Anjou and through his wife, Eleanor, he held the prosperous and cultured Duchy of Aquitaine and further parlayed this powerbase into control of Brittany and the overlordship of Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Seeking to safeguard one of the most crucial links in this disparate chain of loosely bound territories and as a means to articulate his worldly power and prestige, both to his subjects and visiting guests, Henry turned his gaze upon Dover Castle. Construction of the Castle's new massive Central Keep began sometime in the early 1180s. Towering above the harbour, the Keep incorporated the latest innovations in military science and architecture, its clipped stark walls of a contemporaneously remarkable thickness.

Besides its much flaunted and undoubtedly impressive military attributes, Dover Castle also maintained a sumptuous suite of royal apartments within which Henry often entertained visiting aristocratic pilgrims and dignitaries. Work on the Castle and its swelling bulwarks continued after Henry's death through the reign of his much celebrated but historiographically controversial son, Richard I, and into that of the much maligned but historiographically controversial, John I, under whose oversight the concentric rings of the outer and inner walls were completed. It is hard to argue with the idea that John's reign was not a particularly successful one, losing Normandy and the majority of the Plantagenet's

French lands to the waxing strength of the French monarchy, John also endured the First Barons' Rebellion and was humiliatingly forced to sign the Magna Carta, restricting his hitherto, theoretically at least, unlimited royal prerogative.

The war began in earnest in 1215, when John stabilising his position somewhat declared the document void. In response the rebels offered their support and the English throne to Prince Louis of France. The opening stages of Louis', Barons backed, invasion was a stunningly successful landing in Kent followed by his quick capture of London and much of southern England before turning his attention to the truculent garrison of Dover Castle. The French army partially succeeded in breaching the Castle by undermining the Northern Gate but were then repulsed in vicious hand to hand fighting and further attempts to undermine the Castle were thwarted through extensive counter tunnelling by the English. After three months of bitter and grinding siege warfare, the Castle held strong and Louis was forced to withdraw. In 1217, facing increasing opposition which was rallying around William Marshall, the regent of John's young son and successor Henry III, Louis once again moved on Dover. The second siege proved no more successful and tied up a large number of his rapidly destabilising forces, which proved disastrous for Louis' cause when The Marshall inflicted a humiliating defeat on his supporters at the Battle of Lincoln. The fate of Louis' bid for the English Throne was sealed when he suffered two naval defeats off the coast of Dover, severing his supply chain. During his own long reign, Henry III perhaps remembering the pivotal role Dover Castle played in defending his throne, further strengthened the Castle's fortifications, erecting three gate houses and strengthening the Castle's outworks.

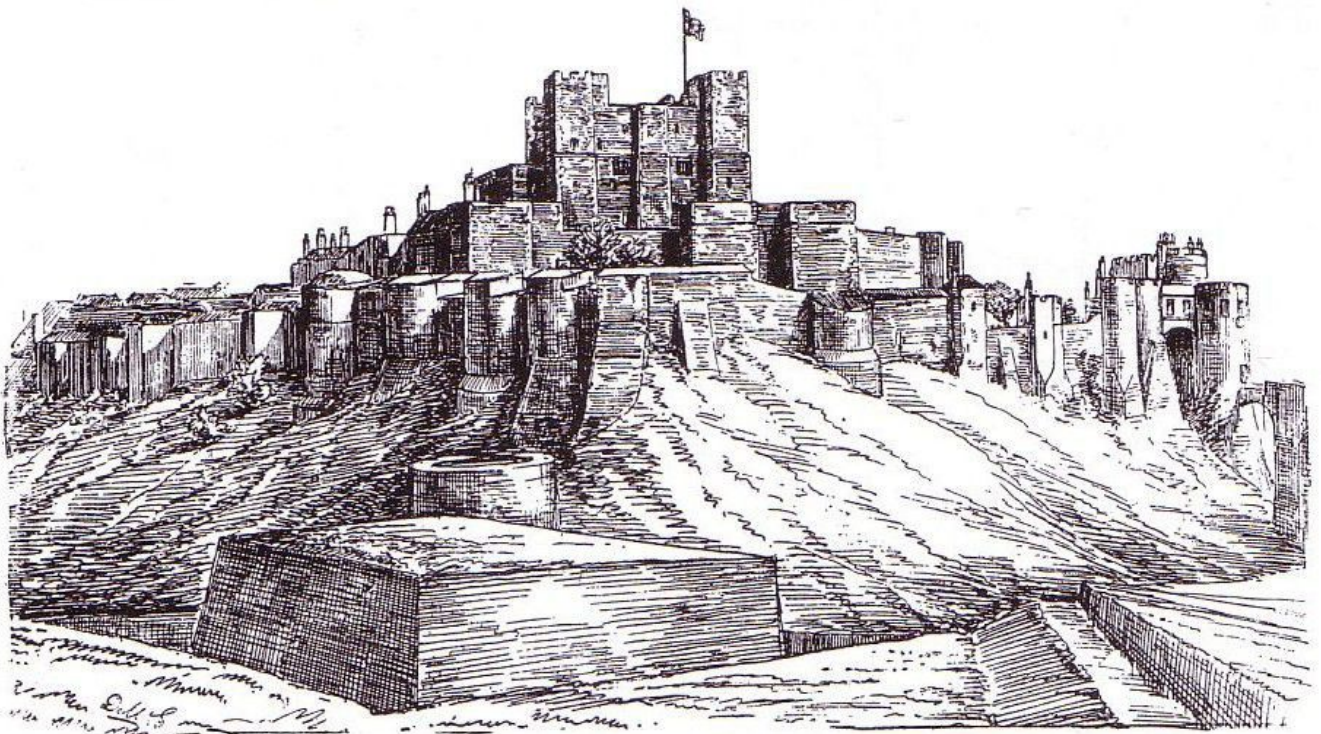
The later infamous Henry VIII, who was in his youth drunk on old dreams of English military hegemony and overlordship, made a valiant effort to restart the Hundred Year War with his faltering invasions of France. In preparation for the war, which he fervently hoped for, the walls of Dover Castle now vulnerable to the ever advancing power of artillery, were further sheltered behind a new series of earthworks. These earthen defences were remodelled and improved on during the Napoleonic War in preparation for the predicted French Invasion. In addition to these trench like network of slopes and barriers, an extensive labyrinthine network of tunnels were dug underneath the Castle; storing and preserving the men and paraphernalia needed to repulse the expected invasion. It was these underground catacombs which later gave the Castle a new purpose during World War II, when they housed both a hospital and a large combined services military command centre which amongst other things organised the evacuation of Dunkirk and the ongoing defence of the Channel.

Dover Castle can easily be counted amongst the most formidable and spectacular within the British Isles. Set amongst the undulating green and muted angularity of the kaleidoscope of earthworks that surround and support it, the Castle's deceptively thick outer wall traces the gentle sweep of the land, its lowest slopes checked by the bowed, coiled strength of the Constable's Gatehouse. Within the loose oval that the Castle's outer wall traces, stands the higher and older inner wall and at its heart the Keep. An exemplar of its kind and one of the last great square keep's constructed before the proliferation of the new rounded keeps, it was the pinnacle of its species before developing circumstances and the evolutionary changes needed to match them, rendered it outmoded; it is the Tyrannosaurus Rex of keeps. Sturdy and unshakable, the keep's extraordinary thickness almost renders it squat despite its formidable height. The fluidity of the landscape upon which the Castle is entrenched clashes with the Spartan austerity and meticulous calculation of its walls, yet the disconnect only serves to accentuate their strength and render the Castle all the more

formidable.

One of the principal jewels in English Heritage's crown, Dover Castle is packed to its Norman rafters with activities and a wealth of historical information for visitors. The Castle's Keep features a fantastically gaudy and delightfully accurate reconstruction of Henry II's royal apartments and a wealth of information on the Castle's history and role within society; understandably focusing upon possibly the most powerful validation of its existence, the epic siege in 1216. Sections of the war tunnels are also open to the public, featuring exhibits of their wartime history focusing on the hospital and the evacuation of Dunkirk in which the Castle played a crucial role.

No matter how you define it, Dover Castle is England's first fortress. Throughout its long history and unlike many other castles striving to reclaim relevancy, it has cleaved strongly to its original purpose to bar entry into England and control the Straits of Dover.



Dover Castle depicted in *The castellated and domestic architecture of Scotland from the twelfth to the eighteenth century* (1887)

Dunstanburgh Castle

Castles are interesting. Crude brutal constructs designed for a crude brutal use, they gradually evolved into the skyscrapers of their day, a mergence between science and art on a truly grand scale, epitomising the pinnacle of medieval engineering. Similarly the applications of castles were equally dualistic; ideal for exerting control over territory, not to mention handy for hiding behind, a castle was also a great canvas upon which lords could scrawl their pretensions and aspirations.

Few ambitions were ever so grand or manifestos so proudly proclaimed as those writ into the walls of Dunstanburgh Castle. The power of such fortifications wasn't just limited to their considerable heft but was rooted in their role as the stronghold and home of the great men and women of the age who sought to rise above the aristocratic crab bucket they found themselves in and cast a great ripple into the river of history. The shadow of this grip on the human psyche lingers still where such fortifications function as both a potent reminder of the realities of the past and a catalyst without equal for the imagination.

The castle as an enduring symbol of medieval society then, reminds us how similar, yet impossibly removed, we are from our ancestors, much like the gulf between the marmite lovers and haters of the modern era. We share the same drives, yet context has bequeathed to us very different dreams. It remains important, of course, never to drift too deeply into nostalgia and away from historical accuracy; had we been born during the Middle Ages most of us would have been dead before our fortieth birthday which may have come as something of a relief after enduring medieval toilet facilities. The proud echoes of Dunstanburgh Castle make this rule very easy to forget.

Like many of Britain's greatest fortresses, the strategic and tactical concerns which informed their placement remaining immutable for more than a millennia, Dunstanburgh is a site with deep roots. Archaeological surveys performed in the 1920s revealed the existence of both Celtic and Roman habitation of the site, although unlike many of its contemporaries, this occupancy was not continuous and whatever Iron Age fortifications stood at Dunstanburgh were eventually abandoned and left to decay in solitude until the Middle Ages.

Dunstanburgh's founder, Thomas, Earl of Lancaster and Leicester, was the second richest man in England, an aristocratic magnate of the first order, infused with a potent combination of royal blood and heaps of cash that propelled him into the heart of the turbulent political storm that would soon come to beset the reign of his much maligned cousin, Edward II of England. Born in 1278 Thomas was the eldest son of Prince Edmund Crouchback, the third son of Henry III. Edmund, who had briefly been King of Sicily, was a noted Crusader and able royal lieutenant who had made his fortune through his unflinching service to his elder brother, Edward I.



Dunstanburgh Castle - photo by Andrew Gustar



Main Gates - photo by Andrew Cheal

When Edmund died in 1296 while besieging the city of Bordeaux on the King's behalf in an attempt to shore up their family's shaky grasp on Gascony, Thomas succeeded to the entirety of his father's lands and titles. At first, Thomas seems to have emulated his father's model of faithful and close service to the senior branch of the royal family, spending much of his early political career participating in England's hegemonic war in Scotland, even fighting in the Battle of Falkirk, as well as playing a key and symbolically charged role in his cousin's coronation.

However, Thomas soon found himself entangled in the King's disputes with the fractious and disgruntled nobility. The key to success for any medieval English king was to build cohesion with the aristocracy, bringing their interests into alignment with the King's own. It was a lesson well learnt by Edward I who had successfully harnessed his subject's natural acquisitiveness to the old dream of English military and political domination of Britain. However, the growing monopolisation of royal favour and its accompanying material benefits by Edward II's closest friend and confidant, Piers Gaveston began to destabilise the equilibrium of the realm, as an irate and belligerent aristocracy sensed a threat to their continued prosperity. Earl Thomas was one of the leading figures in Gaveston's removal from power, contributing a large quantity of troops in the army assembled to apprehend the royal favourite and serving as a judge in his resultant trial held in one of the Earl's Warwickshire holdings.

Thomas and his fellow judges quickly came to the conclusion that the most efficient and expedient way to prevent Piers from gaining access to the King was to have him executed and he was duly beheaded. Thomas had now emerged not only as a leading figure in the delicate political ecosystem of medieval England but also as a rival and stringent critic of the King. Dunstanburgh Castle was to be his shiny new Ferrari with which he hoped to drive around England impressing the other nobles with his wealth, power and impeccable taste, tempting them away from the King and into an affinity with his own alternative court existing in parallel. Work on this ostentatious but undeniably impressive display began in 1313. Thomas spent a vast sum of money on the Castle which was constructed using the latest architectural techniques and heavily modelled upon the royal castles his uncle, Edward I raised in the course of his great building programme during the conquest of Wales.

The Castle's walls and towers continued to grow at an impressive pace until they could easily be seen by the King's custodians squinting off into the horizon at nearby Bamburgh Castle, its location perhaps a calculated challenge. When Edward's government was thrown into crisis in the aftermath of the Battle of Bannockburn, Thomas took the reins of leadership, although here the Earl suffered from the tragic irony that has plagued back seat drivers the world over as he too struggled to curb the fractious dissent of the nobles and halt the catastrophic reversal of the English position within Scotland and was soon removed. While Dunstanburgh appears to have served its purpose most admirably, its mastermind met an unfortunate end in 1321 when, while once again in rebellion against the King, he was captured and swiftly executed trying to flee north to the Castle.

Dunstanburgh and Thomas' vast collections of lands then fell to his younger brother Henry, being restored to him piecemeal by Edward II and later by his son Edward III over the next 6 years. Henry would finish what his brother started, participating in Queen Isabella's successful coup and being appointed jailer of the unfortunate former Edward II. He became one of Edward III's primary advisers and was given control of the Scottish marches, directing

these defences from his seat at Dunstanburgh on the very edge of the Border.

Henry's son and successor, Henry of Grosmont, was one of the new King's closest companions and childhood friends; they shared a love for heady tales of chivalry and acts of martial valour, a widespread sentiment which Edward, like his grandfather used as a tool of mobilisation for war. Henry, now the master of Dunstanburgh Castle, was created Duke of Lancaster and following only Edward, himself, was the second member of the Order of the Garter, at the forefront of a new generation of aristocrats who would lead England to the height of its temporal power.

From there, Dunstanburgh eventually came into the hands of another great royal consigliere, John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, one of Edward III's sons and the husband of Henry's daughter Blanche. John undertook extensive repairs and refurbishment, further fortifying the Castle, creating a new gatehouse and transforming the previous one into a purely domestic building. However, lamentably the Castle figures little in John's long and distinguished career. During the War of the Roses, where the descendants of the Castle's old master, John of Gaunt, vied for the throne, it was held by the Lancastrians but was twice captured in 1461 and 1464 by the Yorkists. Sadly, the damage inflicted during this conflict was never to be repaired since the Castle, isolated from any major population centres, lacked strategic significance. Thus after its heyday of lavish splendour, Dunstanburgh Castle was left to quietly decay by the sea.

As previously alluded to, not much of the Castle remains today, although those parts of it that abide are impressive enough particularly the front of the Castle with its massive double turreted gatehouse which housed the Earl's own apartments and great feasting hall. While the uppermost storeys no longer survive, those levels which remain are readily accessible for exploration, although for the sake of those easily spooked I recommend this be done on a golden Summer's day.

The rest of the Castle stands as a skeleton of its former self; the only other structure which has survived in anything approaching good condition is the Lilburn Tower on the north side. While the Castle's impressive former dimensions, its walls flexing to encompass the entirety of the hill, can still be seen, the large interior now reduced to waste ground eloquently articulates the scale of the Castle and the depths of its former grandeur as a court designed to illuminate the north of England and elevate its patron. The location of the Castle is so idyllic you'd actually be surprised if you didn't see Just Williamesque gangs of children skipping by looking for adventure and mischief with their canine friend. The Castle is located on a wide flat hill lounging comfortably next to the sea and is accessible by means of grassy ten minute stroll from the seaside village of Craster.

The Castle set like a gem in the green and pleasant Northumbrian seaside is truly beautiful and deeply evocative, its current ruination conspiring to make our perceptions of the court it once housed grander still. Dunstanburgh Castle remains a potent relic of a time when the nobility rolled dice for the destiny of nations.

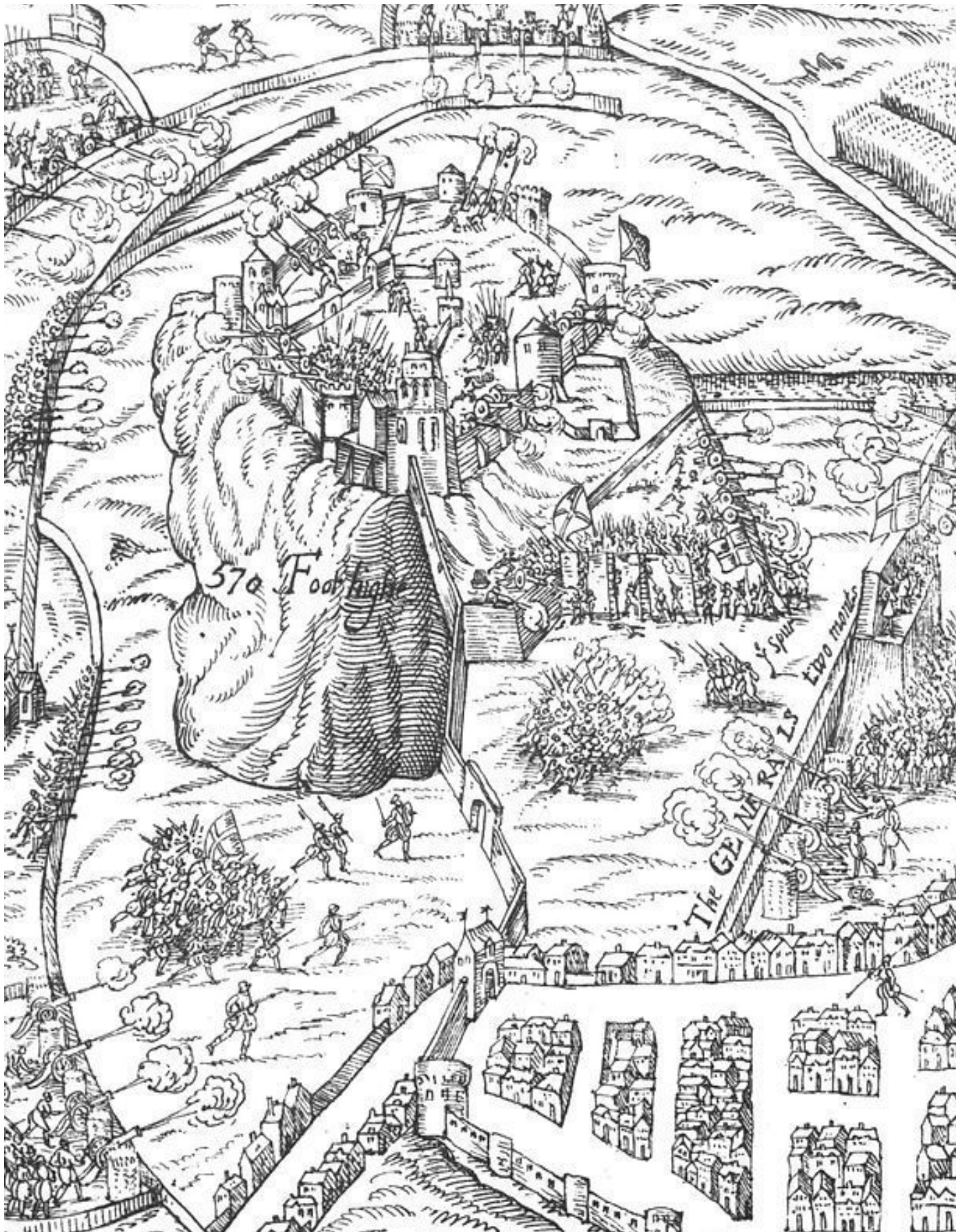
Edinburgh Castle

Few indeed are those architectural legacies still remaining to us that can boast the iconic status of Edinburgh Castle, its distinctive silhouette known throughout the world, accompanied by the gently wafting of bagpipes. Far rarer still are those structures with a comparably singular influence upon the shaping of a nation.

While Stirling and its Castle were the bridge that sutured Scotland's ragged halves together; the point where rolling hills and breweries turn to heather strewn mountains and distilleries, Edinburgh Castle was the nucleus around which the fledgling nation crystallised and a principal engine of its expansion. Scotland's genesis was as hard fought as it was unlikely, a seething storm of fiercely distinct tribes and weltering wars, this boiling mess of Picts, Irish, Britons, Saxons, Norse and later Normans was forged into a country bound together by a new, shared identity. Edinburgh Castle, a place of shelter and hearthside stretching back into the mists of time was the springboard for the reinvention and consolidation of this emerging state.

Its formidable natural defences and strategic importance quickly transformed the Castle into a seat of royal power and a principal node in the unfolding nervous system of the country's administration; a key influence in both defining the new and ever evolving nation and allowing it to function and thrive, an infusion of symbolic and tangible relevance which saw the Castle targeted many times in the cyclic wars for control of the country. Even in the face of an absentee monarchy and the country's initially meandering and grudging integration into the newly realised Britain, Edinburgh Castle, set grandly above Scotland's first city, remained one of Scotland's most potent symbols. Today, Edinburgh Castle stands ensconced within the heart of Edinburgh, amongst the highest concentration of shortbread tins and those tiny bottles of whisky per mile found anywhere in the world. Scotland like the City itself, unfolding and growing within its shadow.

Castle Rock, which would be an impressive spectacle even stripped of the eponymous Castle was home to limited Bronze Age settlement, although interestingly evidence suggests that nearby sites enjoyed far more intensive and sustained habitation and that the iconic rock was relatively insignificant to the regrettably still obscure goings on of Bronze Age society. The site would eventually become home to a more substantive Iron Age Celtic settlement, the ever fastidious but ethnographically obsessed Roman historians claiming the site was a stronghold of the Votadini.



Detail from an old woodcut of Edinburgh Castle during the Lang Siege in 1573

While the site is bereft of Roman ruins, archaeologists have discovered the existence of a number of Roman artefacts; this evidence of an ongoing trade relationship with Rome and the settlement's position south of the Antonine Wall, the high-water mark of Roman expansion stretching from the Clyde to the Forth, suggests the site was under at least tacit Roman sovereignty if not actual occupation in the indistinct and ill-defined frontier province. From the power vacuum created by the Roman withdrawal from Britain, emerged the Brittonic speaking Romano-Briton Kingdoms, one of which, Gododdin, was centred upon Edinburgh and quickly became heavily engaged in a bitter war for survival with the multitude of land-starved settlers descending on Britain.

It seems that in 638 AD, Irish invaders from the Kingdom of Dal Riata besieged the fortress but were successfully repulsed only for the great fort to be taken and the entire Kingdom destroyed later that year by the Saxons of Northumbria. The Saxons brief ascendancy in the south of Scotland did little to stem the endemic warfare and as Northumbria's power waned, new factions struggled to the fore. In 954 Edinburgh was captured by King Indulf of Alba, which completed the integration of Lothian into the emerging proto state. The great victories of his kinsman and eventual successor, the warlike and capable Malcolm II, over the Anglo-Danish firmly established the border with England while his over lordship of the Kingdom of Strathclyde and possibly of the Norse-Gael kingdoms of the Islands established Scotland as the predominant power within the region. A process his heirs would continue up to and beyond the Norman inspired cultural revolution.

Edinburgh Castle first came to prominence during the reign of Malcolm III who spent much of his time in residence there, where he began the Castle's transformation into the principal royal bastion and administrative centre. Sometime between 1140 -1150 Malcolm's son, David I, constructed a chapel within the Castle's confines, dedicated to his then canonised mother St Margret, the granddaughter and great niece of two English Kings, Edmund Ironside and Edward the Confessor. Additionally, during this period the Castle played host to a great Council of the Kingdom's most prominent noblemen and clergy summoned by David I; a proto parliament which facilitated the numerous administrative and structural reforms by which David sought to exert power and influence throughout his Kingdom.

David's grandson and immediate successor, Malcolm IV spent much of his reign in heated negotiations with Henry II of England and his own rebellious nobles; a process from which he eventually triumphed in 1164 after Somerled, King of the Isles, was slain in battle by the forces of the Bishop of Glasgow. Malcolm was succeeded by his brother William the Lion, highly ambitious and determined to propagate his dynastic power. William saw the 1173 uprising against England's volatile but Machiavellian Henry II as an opportunity to re-establish his family's claim to the Earldoms of Northumbria and Huntingdon.

Unfortunately for William, he was almost immediately captured, after rashly charging the English army more or less alone during the Battle of Alnwick in 1174 and was forced to sign the humiliating Treaty of Falaise, by which William ceded Edinburgh alongside several other significant Scottish castles to Henry who he was forced to acknowledge as his feudal overlord. For the first time, Scotland's premier Castle was in English hands. William eventually reclaimed Edinburgh after agreeing to marry Henry's illegitimate cousin, Ermengrade de Beaumont. William, his martial ambitions thwarted, spent the remainder of his long reign continuing the work of his grandfather ratifying law codes, founding burghs and modernising Scotland's infrastructure as a way of further building and disseminating

royal influence. Much of this work was done from Edinburgh Castle which some time during this period came to house the repository of government charters and writs placing the Castle at the centre of Scotland's ongoing transformation.

The death of Alexander III with no clear heir caused a period of internal instability in Scotland as the nobles bickered over who would succeed him; two of the main claimants being the powerful Bruce and Balliol families. In order to avoid further bloodshed and stabilise the situation, Edward I of England was appointed to arbitrate the dispute. Given that Edward, fresh from his subjugation of Wales, was a blood stained conqueror who burned with the desire to reclaim the temporal glories of his ancestors and unite all of Britain under English rule, this might be considered something of a mistake. Edward attempted to use the dispute to exert over lordship upon this northern neighbour and after negotiations failed to deliver the desired results, he resolved to impose order, not to mention his authority, at the point of the sword.

In 1296, Edinburgh Castle was taken by the invading English after a brutally short three day siege. The English quickly set about restoring and improving the Castle's defences, after which it stood unassailable as the Scottish War for Independence raged around it. In 1314, however, with the Scots now largely unified under Robert the Bruce and the English hampered by the inept leadership of the hapless Edward II, the military situation had undergone an almost complete reversal. The exhausted English war effort was dealt a further blow when Earl Thomas Randolph of Moray led a daring night raid on Edinburgh Castle, taking the walls through stealth and guile, the victorious raiders then raised what sections of the Castle they could to preclude the English reoccupying the site.

Despite Robert Bruce's decisive victory at Bannockburn, the whole bloody drama was to play out yet again a generation later when in 1332 those exiled lords who had, as a result of siding with the wrong claimant, lost their Scottish lands banded together and invaded a suddenly vulnerable Scotland ruled by the young David II. Their success at the Battle of Dupplin Moor fired the imagination of Edward III who resurrecting his grandfather's ambitions invaded Scotland in 1333, declaring his intent to place his ally and vassal Edward Balliol on the throne.

In 1335, the Castle once more fell into English hands, only for the resurgent Scots to reclaim it in 1341 in a dramatic and Looney Tunes-esque escapade featuring a number of Scottish soldiers gaining entrance to the Castle under the guise of merchants, whereupon they prevented the gates being closed. In 1346, David II leading a counter invasion, was captured at the Battle of Neville's Cross. Luckily, however, for the young King, Edward III had decided that he would much rather be King of France than make someone else King of Scotland and David, although now burdened with a hefty ransom, was released following a promise to name Edward as his successor. Following his return to Scotland, David took up residence in Edinburgh Castle where he began construction of the imposing David Tower, further strengthening the Castle's already formidable defences.

In 1400, the Castle was besieged by Henry IV but his inability to take it effectively stymied the already inauspicious invasion and the English army was compelled to retreat. Throughout the 15th century the Castle saw sustained building work designed to modernise it, making provision for artillery as well as the construction of a new palace complex. The Castle briefly came under siege in 1440 by the Douglas family after the chancellor, Sir

William Crichton, had the Earl of Douglas assassinated within its walls. Its increased militarisation and the vigorous demands of a royal court meant that the royal family avoided the Castle, preferring to take up residence within the City itself.

In the religiously fuelled clash between Mary Queen of Scots and members of her bitterly misogynistic and staunchly Protestant nobility, who rallied around her infant son James VI as a figurehead, Edinburgh Castle became the last stand of Mary's forces when the castellan Sir William Kirkcaldy refused to surrender in the Lang Siege, or for those of you who don't speak Scottish, the long siege, of 1571-1573. The siege was only brought to a conclusion with the arrival of a huge artillery train from England which devastated the Castle, destroying the David Tower and compelling the defenders to finally surrender.

Religious wars were now all the rage in Europe and in the 1639 Bishops' War, the Castle was twice captured by Covenanter forces fighting to abolish the Episcopal system which the now absentee Stuart Kings sought to foster. After the Bishops' War had spiralled into the bloodbath of the War of Three Kingdoms, the Covenanter controlled Scottish Parliament eventually declared war on their former allies in the English Parliament, following the unsanctioned execution of their joint King, Charles I. Their coronation of Charles II provoked the pernicious Oliver Cromwell to march north and having narrowly dispatched the Scottish Army at the Battle of Dunbar he immediately besieged Edinburgh Castle, finally reducing it three months later. Following the deposition of the Stuarts in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the Castle became entangled in perhaps the most romanticised chapter of Scotland's long, tattered but proud history, the Jacobite risings. Edinburgh Castle, was initially threatened in the first Jacobite rising of 1715 when a number of Highlanders with the help of defectors within the garrison attempted to gain entrance to the Castle. This attempt was to prove no more successful than the wider rebellion and the Jacobites were soon chased off when in a darkly comedic moment, it emerged that the rope ladders were too short.

During the great uprising of 1745, Edinburgh, gripped by a great up-swell of Jacobite sentiment, opened its gates to Bonnie Prince Charlie, the grandson of the deposed James II, who triumphantly marched through the City to the adoring cheers of his subjects. The effect was ruined somewhat by the stubborn refusal of the Castle's garrison to surrender. After a half-hearted and abortive attempt to lay siege to the ancient Castle, it was decided to simply leave the Castle behind as an irrelevance and begin the re-conquest of Britain elsewhere. Yet as the Jacobite army marched away, pipes crooning and banners fluttering in the breeze, the young Prince's inability to take the Castle revealed the logistical deficiencies and weakness of leadership which would eventually prove their undoing.

The gently muted pearly gold of Edinburgh Castle's battlements, sprouting out of the great crag of black volcanic rock remains a powerful image in the Scottish cultural lexicon. Rising imperiously above Edinburgh's Old Town on its primordial dais, the crest and sweep of the Castle cannot help but elicit awe and reverence. This, every line of ruptured rock and carved stone seems to say, is a site whose bones are soaked deeply in the mire of history. Entrance via the wide slope at the Castle's front is blocked by the imposing edifice of the Gate House, beyond which supplicants must pass through an upwardly winding concourse, hemmed in by the Castle's portcullis and the flexing mass of the Castle's great rock ward wall. Here at the artificially levelled plateau of the Castle, stands an architectural treasure trove and study in contrasts; the Renaissance Palace complex and Great Hall jostling with the Spartan utility of the New Barracks and gun foundries. Sadly, centuries at the heart of Scotland's



Edinburgh Castle - photo by Richard Fisher / Flickr

turbulent politics have taken their toll on Edinburgh Castle and nothing but vestigial foundations of the high medieval castle and, perhaps portentously given her link to the Castle's first patrons, the chapel of St Margret remain today. Yet Edinburgh Castle has always found a way to reinvent itself down the ages, changing in rhyme to the altering tempo of Scottish politics.

Today Edinburgh Castle wears the regalia of its history proudly and the site is brimming with historic artefacts and materials. The Castle is home not only to the Regimental museums of the Royal Scots and the Royal Scots Dragoons which are well worth a look but also hosts the National War Museum and the National War Memorial, both paying tribute to the service of the lost generations of Scottish soldiery and as a potent reminder to subsequent generations. Perhaps, in light of the recent reorientation of Scottish national sentiment, some of Edinburgh Castle's most relevant treasures are the Crown Sceptre and Sword of the Scottish Crown Jewels presented to James IV by the Papacy and first used in the coronation of Mary Queen of Scots. The coronation regalia was locked away and forgotten following the Union of the Crowns, after which all of Scotland's Kings and Queens were crowned in England.

More potent a relic still of the Scottish monarchy and to many a symbol of her wounded political autonomy is the Stone of Destiny used for centuries in the coronation of the Scottish monarchy, stretching back into legend and the long years before Scotland's political unification and the composition of a shared cultural identity. The Stone made a tempting target for Edward I who capturing it, had it removed to England and incorporated into the English coronation ceremony where it remained until 1996, when it was enshrined in Edinburgh Castle. While the great pulpit of volcanic rock upon which the Castle stands is long extinct, Edinburgh Castle and the ideals we eagerly project upon it smoulder still.

Pembroke Castle

While Caernarfon was the ultimate manifestation of Anglo-Norman occupied Wales wrought into stone and mortar, Pembroke was its beating heart. Today ensconced upon a spur of rock, the Cleddau estuary flowing gently by, Pembroke Castle stands still, its long shadow silent and serene. Yet its walls and towers as tall and proud now as they ever were echo with purpose. Born on the ragged bleeding edge of Europe's latest and most disreputable empire, from the efforts of a caste of mercenary adventurers, few castles can boast a history as long, varied or as significant as that of Pembroke. The bulwark of Anglo-Norman power in southern Wales and the springboard for their invasion of Ireland, the Castle was an essential component in the success of their burgeoning imperialistic ambitions which slowly crystallised out of good old fashioned greed and opportunism, the twin engines of Norman political expansion. In its time Pembroke Castle has sheltered budding Norman warlords, Chivalric heroes, great hosts of conquest, the crème de la crème of European aristocracy and the birth of a new royal dynasty. Many are the times that Pembroke Castle has been the fulcrum upon which the destiny of Britain turned.

The site of the Castle has been a place of shelter since time immemorial; beneath the Castle carved out over millennia by the lapping tides from the great rocky outcrop upon which it stands lies Wogans Cavern, a natural cave which was home to a Neolithic settlement, substantive numbers of which can be found throughout Pembrokeshire. An igneous solution to the numerous and presumably toothy problems our Stone Age ancestors struggled against. Its natural defences and strategic location make it likely that the site retained its significance into the Bronze Age, a hypothesis lent further weight by archaeological evidence pointing to the eventual presence of a Roman outpost on the site.

Well within a generation of the Norman Conquest of England, the roving eyes of the Norman aristocracy had started to turn west and north to Wales and Scotland in a bid for further wealth and perhaps autonomy from the newly minted and increasingly centralised monarchy. The mindset of the average Norman nobleman in the 11th century can perhaps best be described as the balancing point between a Viking and a Mafioso. Their cultural forbearers and relatives had ranged across Europe as mercenaries, enjoying particular success in southern Italy where they soon discovered it was far more efficient to simply overthrow the local Lombard lords and take their gold in a onetime lump sum rather than have them fritter it away hiring the Normans over a period of several years. The rapacious Norman aristocrats who had participated in the conquest were sharks never satisfied, forever

compelled by the confluences of nature to swim forward in search of future prey unable to pause for fear of drowning. Thus in 1093 with his countrymen tearing chunks out of the Welsh Princedoms in a ragged tide of aggression, Earl Roger of Montgomery the right hand man of William the Conqueror constructed a keep at Pembroke as a means of dominating his freshly won Welsh possessions. During the Castle's formative years it repulsed two separate sieges by the probably understandably irate Welsh, while dozens of hastily built Norman castles constructed during their patchwork conquest fell around it. Upon Roger's death his eldest son, Robert of Belleme, inherited both his Norman lands and then his Welsh and English acquisitions after the premature death of his younger brother Hugh. Roger was now one of the most powerful men in the Anglo-Norman world. However he enmeshed himself in the dynastic squabbles of the Conqueror's sons, throwing his lot in with the erstwhile King's eldest and partially disinherited son, Duke Robert of Normandy. When in 1101 Robert's latest attempt to seize the throne failed, Henry I moved quickly against his brother's supporters in England and in 1102 confiscated all of Belleme's lands forcing him to flee to Normandy. The Castle was eventually gifted, alongside the new Earldom of Pembroke, to Gilbert de Clare by Henry's nephew and successor, King Stephen. Gilbert was in turn succeeded by his son Richard de Clare known to history as Strongbow. His wealth and titles threatened by ill fortune in the ongoing Anarchy, Richard joined the vanguard of the Norman Invasion of Ireland when he intervened in the ongoing dynastic dispute in the Kingdom of Leinster, soliciting for himself the hand of King Diarmait Mac Murchada's eldest daughter in marriage. Despite his initial success and attempt to contest the succession after Diarmait's death, Richard's dreams for an Irish crown were thwarted when the irrepressible and talented Henry II intervened in Ireland directly subjugating the local rulers and quashing his vassals' experiments in militarily-minded free enterprise. If Wales and Ireland were to be conquered from the walls of Pembroke Castle, which now prospered as both a trading post and staging area, it was to be done under the auspices of an English Crown.

In 1189, William Marshal inherited the Earldom and its Castle through his marriage to Isabel de Clare kindly arranged for him by Richard I. The Marshall, was The Beatles of his time – that is if The Beatles had all been rolled up into one and given a sword. Rising from modest roots, William became renowned upon the European tournament circuit through a cunningly deployed mixture of consummate skill and paying troubadours to sing about his exploits. Widely hailed as the greatest knight in Christendom and the soul of chivalry, William was made the tutor of Henry II's eldest son, Henry the Young King. During the younger Henry's rebellion, William clashed blades with his pupil's younger brother, the future Richard I. When the chivalrically immersed Richard became King, he welcomed his erstwhile enemy with open arms. The new Earl of Pembroke undertook a substantive building campaign replacing the earlier wooden and earth fortress with one of stone. William went on to serve as Regent to the infant Henry III during which period the now elderly former tournament champion defeated an invasion by Prince Louis of France. The Marshal was succeeded by his sons, all five of whom served as Earl before dying without issue, although each added to the increasingly formidable defences of Pembroke Castle.

Nepotism is a phenomenon that never goes out of fashion and in 1247 William de Valence was gifted the Castle by his half-brother Henry III, along with Joan Marshall's hand in marriage; marrying the daughters of strangers to get their land, being one of the middle ages most cherished traditions. As the most powerful lord in Norman dominated southern Wales, William was his brother's de facto representative and came into sporadic conflict with the Welsh Princes, resolutely preserving the Normans powerbase within



Pembroke Castle - photo by Phillip Ingham / Flickr



Pembroke Castle - photo by Ben Salter / Flickr

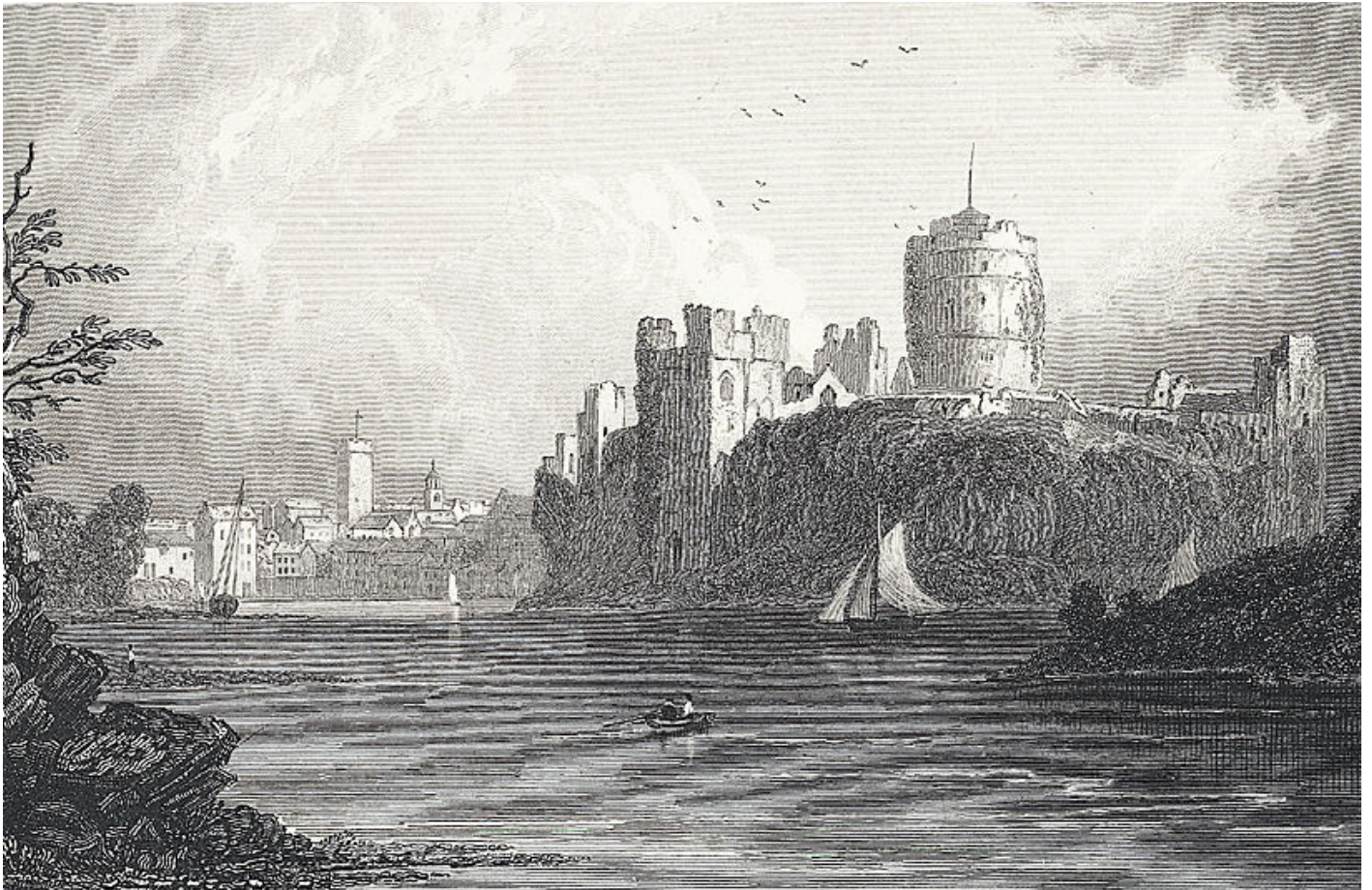
Pembrokeshire. Naturally then, during the reign of his nephew, Edward I, William was a major figure in the 1283 conquest of Wales, leading a substantive force from the south while Edward attacked from the north. During their tenure as Earls, the Valence family gave the Castle its current and most enduring shape, erecting the curtain wall and towers which stand today. In 1389 with the death of John Hastings, the last of the Valence descendants, the Castle defaulted back into royal hands.

And so it languished under a succession of constables and royally appointed functionaries in the gathering twilight between the Hundred Year War and the War of the Roses. The genial but incapable Henry VI bestowed the Castle and its accompanying lands and titles to his half-brother, Jasper Tudor, in 1452. Jasper's elder brother, Edmund, was created Earl of Richmond and was married to the young Margret Beaufort, a distant cousin of the King. When Edmund, a natural Lancastrian through this dual links of Henry VI and his wife died in the opening stages of the War of the Roses, a heavily pregnant Margret was brought to the shelter of Pembroke Castle where her son, the future Henry VII, was born and raised. Following the victory of the House of York and Edward IV, Jasper alongside his nephew fled to France. When they returned fourteen years later, it was at a head of an army, defeating Richard III, the last son of the now depleted House of York at the Battle of Bosworth. Henry Tudor ushered in a new royal dynasty that would change the face of the world and brought the middle ages to a close with the clash of steel. During the War of the Three Kingdoms the Castle sided with Parliament, successfully repelling a royalist siege only for the garrison, who didn't know when they were onto a good thing, to switch sides near the close of the war. Oliver Cromwell reacting with the level headedness and magnanimity for which he is well remembered, had them all executed before levelling much of the Castle which was only returned to its former glory after two separate restoration projects in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Classically good looking, with just enough rough edges to make it interesting, Pembroke Castle if it was to star in a movie, would be the leading man in a big budget summer romantic comedy. Framed beautifully rearing gently above the pleasant and peaceful town of Pembroke, the Castle's stolid and sturdy battlements on its landward side are capped by a network of smooth rounded towers. The most formidable and visually pleasing of the Castle's outer defences is the great twin turreted gatehouse which incorporates within its construction the cutting edge of militarily architectural techniques as well as harbouring the lavish living accommodation which was added to and fully utilised by the Valence family during their tenure as Earls. A clear distinction can be made by even the most casual observer between the outer defences and the older inner ward which contains the ruins of the Great Hall and Pembroke's piece de résistance, the Norman Keep raised by William Marshal. The Keep miraculously intact rises from the heart of the Castle; the scale of its grandeur and artifice of construction reflecting the status of the man who raised it and the paradoxes of his age. The Castle's Gatehouse now shelters the majority of its educational resources which do an exceptional job in conveying the Castle's disparate yet always significant history in admirable detail. In addition to this, a number of the Castle's towers also contain audio visual presentations focusing on the life of several of the Castle's masters which while lacking the sheer level of detail of the Castle's literature are well worth a watch.

Pembroke Castle is a 'must see' for all fans of Medieval history. Besides its classical good looks and stunning location, Pembroke exerted an incredible power and influence over the fabric of the British Isles time and time again. A remote border outpost whose presence

coalesced a nation about itself. A home to some of medieval Europe's most influential figures, Pembroke Castle has always found itself in the maelstrom of unfolding events which created modern Europe, yet now unbent and unbroken it slumbers.



Pembroke Castle around 1830 - drawn by Henry Gastineau and J.C Varrall

Stirling Castle

Stirling Castle perched imperiously upon a vast crag of rough primeval rock enfolded on every side by its sweeping lines of carved stone and mortar serves as an unblinking sentinel over the suture that joins the whisky and industry soaked lowlands to the whisky and romance soaked highlands. For the majority of the trackless depths of Scotland's history, wreathed as the popular consciousness of most foreigners and some natives would have it in equal levels of mist and martial strife, the town of Stirling has served as the gateway between the country's often disparate halves.

This eminence results from the ford across the river Forth, which alongside the various incarnations of Stirling Bridge, made the town the most reliable and robust point of transition across the river. Indeed the concept resonated within the minds of our medieval forebears to such an extent that in many maps of Britain, the highlands appear isolated amidst the sea divorced from the mainland but for a single bridge linking the two 'Islands'. In an age driven by symbolism, cartographers evidently were yet to develop the keen eye for detail for which their profession was to become so well known. If the town and its bridge have played a unique and crucial role in Scotland's history, no less can be said of the Castle which so emphatically dominates both; the bulk of its imposing edifice articulating its importance in forging the destiny of a nation.

The earliest history of the site's political significance has now thoroughly enmeshed into legend. It seems that the fortress played a significant role in the swirling anarchy of the Picts, Celts, Scots and Saxons relentless scrabbling wars of dominion in the 7th and 8th centuries. The Castle was even at one point in the 15th century strongly identified, by some, with the stronghold of the mythic yet strangely irrepressible King Arthur. It is notable, however, that this can be said of virtually every castle, fort and hill within the British Isles. The first indisputable evidence of the Castle originates from 1107 when Alexander I constructed a chapel there, suggesting that the site had already been occupied for some time and that it was a place of considerable significance to the burgeoning Scottish monarchy.

Alexander's successor, David I raised both the profile and Royal affinity of the Castle, also turning the town into a royal burgh. When William the Lion was captured at the Battle of Alnwick by Ranulf De Glanvill in 1174, he was compelled by the infamously opportunistic



Stirling Castle in the 18th century



Stirling Castle today - photo by John McPake / Stirling Council

and ambitious Henry II to sign the Treaty of Falaise whereby many of Scotland's key castles, including those at Stirling and Edinburgh, were placed into English hands. Thankfully for the Scots, this staggering strategic advantage was bartered away by Richard I in short order when he allowed the Scottish King to buy out of the treaty in 1189 during his fundraising activities for the Second Crusade.

The Castle went on to play a pivotal role in the Wars of Scottish Independence where despite the prodigious nature of its defences, both artificial and natural, it was to change hands with almost dizzying regularity. These frighteningly literal home invasions were often preceded by one of the disastrous reversals in fortunes that so characterised the Wars of Independence such as the Battles of Stirling Bridge or Falkirk. In 1314 it fell to Edward II to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory when the newly minted King Robert the Bruce of Scotland defeated him at the Battle at Bannockburn; a battle which was triggered when Edward marched north of the border in order to relieve the Castle's besieged garrison. The victory of the native Scottish King who had earlier heaped such patronage upon it proved to be a melancholy event for the Castle since in the wake of his victory Bruce had the fortress demolished to prevent recapture by the enemy. However, the Castle was soon to be resurrected, rising out of the fires of the second War of Independence where in 1336 it once more fell under the yoke of English control only to be retaken by the future King Robert Stuart after a gruelling siege in 1342.

Over the next two hundred years Stirling was gradually transformed from a medieval castle into an increasingly extravagant royal residence. Stirling was to become the favoured residence of James II who had spent much of his childhood there. This pattern of close attachment to Stirling Castle was played out by his son James III who was both born within the Castle and died within sight of it at the Battle of Sauchieburn. Extensive building work was undertaken during the reign of the singularly ambitious James IV who sought to turn Stirling Castle into the heart of a true renaissance kingdom and rebuilt his ancestral residence to reflect the latest architectural fashions and military innovations from the Continent.

The Castle then served as the childhood home of James V's heir, Mary Queen of Scots, the centre for the Regency of her mother, Mary of Guise, and the site of her heroic struggle against both the English and large elements of the Scottish aristocracy led by the Earl of Arran. Like his grandfather James V, the wearily named James VI was both educated and crowned within the walls of Stirling Castle in 1566. However, when following the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, the Scottish King also gained the English crown, he and the successive generations of the joint monarchy departed for London seldom to return. The Castle played little role in either the Bishops War where the Covenanters rose to prominence or the first stage of the War of the Three Kingdoms when they joined with the English Parliament in waging war on their shared king. However, when the English executed Charles I without the consent of their more northern comrades, the Scots quickly crowned his son Charles II who visited Stirling Castle on his march south. Contrary to narrative conventions, however, the dashing young king was thwarted in short order and Stirling Castle was forced to capitulate to General Monck after less than a week of fighting. During the last great swell of the Jacobite cause in the 1745 rising, the Castle while besieged once and frequently threatened was stoutly garrisoned by government troops, perhaps disloyally failing to yield to the last descendent of its traditional masters.

The oldest part of Castle still standing today was constructed in the 1490s, with subsequent construction proceeding well into the 18th century. As such, the design and architecture eloquently attests to the Castle's regal status and the lofty ambitions of its inhabitants. The interior as it stands now comprises of two concentric courtyards, the first of which is formed by the enclosing sections of the inner wall and the competing grandeur of the Palace of James V, festooned as it is with the baroque forms of gargoyles and Greek gods and the alarming yet authentic gold orange hue of the Great Hall constructed by his father James IV and built in 1503. The second, innermost courtyard is formed from the Great Hall and Palace pinning the old royal apartments of James IV up against the Chapel founded by James VI before his departure to London. In 1708, worried by the potential for Jacobite uprising the defences of the then deteriorating palace complex were further strengthened with an additional outer wall being constructed around sections of the perimeter.

Stirling Castle is intimately entwined with the history of Scotland and her monarchy, a significance which is recognized and presented throughout its numerous components with admirable vigour. The Castle's educational resources have been well crafted and touch upon the Castle's history almost in its entirety while exploring its main focus, the renaissance inspired nucleus of the Castle with a remarkable level of detail. The Palace apartments have been sumptuously restored and are resplendent with contemporary finery, particularly the Queen's wing reflecting heavily the role played by Mary of Guise in Scotland's continued independence following the ill timed death of her husband. Such decorations include the famous Unicorn Hunt Tapestry as well as installed replicas of the intriguing yet somewhat eerie Stirling Heads, the intricately carved and painted visages of numerous monarchs both classical and contemporary which stare down from their mosaic like mounts upon the ceiling. These symbolism laden artworks were meant to function as a constant reminder to the Stuart monarch of the virtues they must cultivate.

For those purists like myself who believe the Castle should be a fundamentally medieval institution all is not lost. The lower level of the palace leads to amongst other things a detailed exhibit and suitably comprehensive time-line of the Wars of Independence. The palace vaults include for those so blessed or burdened, a number of rooms geared to learning through play for children which are suitably thematic as well as a wisely now lion free, historic lion pen. The most impressive forum for further education on the Castle's long, fascinating and even occasionally glorious history is the Castle Exhibit located in the Queen Anne garden which outlines the entirety of the Castle's known history and expands upon the numerous instances and intricacies of the Castle's royal affinity.

Stirling Castle's location near the centre of Scotland well represents and indeed informs its central place in the Country's history. I would urge any with the opportunity to visit Stirling Castle to do so. It is a beautiful site displaying a variety of architectural innovations both civilian and military and what's more it presents historical information with a remarkable frequency and exhaustive depth. The Castle sinks into the history of Scotland much like its foundations do into its living rock. The turbulence of its past written into the side of the Castle through the scars of cannon, its ambition for the future in the grandeur of its palace complex.

Tintagel Castle

The bleached bones of a blasted cliff-top castle, scourged by leaping sea and howling wind, Tintagel made as much from tempered dreams as carved stone still has the power to inspire. While the Castle that once crowned it is now reduced to jagged splinters, the site itself, set deep into the labyrinthine Cornish coast upon a great spur of wave hewn rock, is perhaps the most evocative in the British Isles, possessed of a wild yet deeply permeating and reverberating beauty. Built atop an ancient fortress and inexorably tied to one of Britain's most pervasive legends, Tintagel's political reality stretches deep into the Island's mist shrouded past while its mythical legacy echoes to this day.

Unlike the majority of its fellow castles that share Iron Age roots, many of which benefited from continuous habitation, Tintagel Castle's medieval rebirth came relatively late and was a direct result of the transmuted Celtic folk tales which had, during the flourishing of the Middle Ages, come to rest upon Tintagel. When these tales fired the imagination of a newly rising royal prince, Richard Earl of Cornwall, he raised a grand castle upon the misremembered ruins of a lost royal court. For in the great shared canon of romance literature hungrily devoured by the noble courts that criss-crossed Europe and which alongside the universality of the church bound it together with a singular aristocratic culture, Tintagel is the place wherein the story of Arthur's chivalric monument and the Once and Future King begins.

In 43 AD, the clockwork of the monolithic Roman Empire began to spin towards the conquest of Britain, cranked by the hand of the Emperor Claudius. Claudius had been elevated as a result of the machinations of the fickle and avaricious Praetorian Guard and politically exposed due to his dubious claim to the Imperial title, embarked upon a series of military expansions as a way of building credibility and support within Rome. It remains unclear what the Romans found at Tintagel as the legions and administration of the empire unfurled itself across Britain, since archaeological surveys performed on the site have thus far found no trace of Celtic settlement although the Dumnonii tribe had settled the area and there was undoubtedly a hill fort located at nearby Wilapark. Similarly, as of yet no buildings have been discovered at Tintagel dating from the Romans' long occupation.

However, examination of the site has revealed a cache of Roman material including a substantial number of pottery fragments, other household goods and a chronologically



Remains of Tintagel Castle - photo by Ben Salter

diverse hoard of Roman minted coins. This alongside Tintagel's position athwart what is now a long gone Roman road into the heart of Cornwall, which was then one of the Empire's biggest suppliers in the lucrative tin trade, indicates that on the balance of probability Tintagel was already settled by the time the Empire entered its twilight although the size and nature of the hypothetical settlement remains a mystery.

Following the completion of the struggling Empire's slow withdrawal from Britain in 410, the famed and sophisticated but increasingly localised Roman administration collapsed into a number of fledging kingdoms often based upon old but still extant tribal distinctions. Tintagel fell under the domains of the Kingdom of Dumnonia which controlled much of what would become south western England and it was here under the Dumnonian kings that Tintagel would reach the height of its temporal power and importance.

The site quickly transformed into a crucial trading hub and major Romano-British settlement, archaeologists have uncovered luxury Mediterranean imports including high quality North African pottery and glassware in numbers far outstripping those seen anywhere else in Britain during this period, articulating Tintagel's great wealth and importance. If, although it is often disputed, Britain had entered a Dark Age where civilization teetered on the brink, then Tintagel was undoubtedly one of its brightest lights. The site and the large compound

built both atop the island and stretching to encompass the surrounding cliff top was one of the principal centres for the semi-migratory and often embattled royal court of Dumnonia alongside Exeter and Cadbury.

As well as its undeniable value as a trading post and its geographical location, the royal favour shown to Tintagel may well have been informed by its formidable natural defences. The island which formed the heart of the palace complex was accessible to the mainland only via a narrow causeway and further protected on the landward side by a wide ditch. Such concerns must have loomed increasingly in the minds of the successive ranks of Dumnonian kingship as they were forced to contend not only with rival Romano-British kingdoms but also the predatory attentions of the swelling tide of Saxon settlement. The Saxons had originally come to Britain as mercenaries before, like mercenaries the world over, striking upon a more direct method of transferring their employers cash and land to themselves and then writing home to their friends and family about a rich new land ripe for the taking.

The why and when of Tintagel's abandonment has been lost in the mists of time, the Romano-British world was wiped away by the advancing Saxons and Germanic tribes who taking advantage of the opportunities arising from their hard won conquests quickly set about continuing their own internecine wars. While their political manifestations were destroyed, elements of Brythonic language and culture lingered in Cornwall. They were further preserved within Wales and the Kingdom of Strathclyde alongside a greater degree of polity, albeit fragmented and transitory, in the cases of Wales and Strathclyde respectively.

In 1136, Geoffrey of Monmouth finished his *Historia Regum Britannia*, a vastly intriguing and imaginative pseudo history in which he traces the history of Britain all the way back to Brutus, a Trojan refugee whose people settled the Isles after defeating the terrible race of giants who lived there. Furthermore, it was one of the first and certainly the most widespread exposure of non Welsh speakers to the legends of King Arthur. Gaining steadily in popularity as they spread through the aristocratic network of western and central Europe, the Arthurian tales conflated with the rapidly coalescing principles and pageantry of chivalric practice soon emerged as the centrepiece of Romance literature, forming a potent cultural movement and becoming Europe's most pervasive and enduring fad. Eagerly devoured by nobles throughout Europe, the legend of Arthur often changed with the telling and soon new versions of the story were being written including new characters and episodes as a means of expounding upon favoured themes.

In many ways King Arthur was the Batman of Medieval Europe enjoyed by many, worshiped by some but instantly recognisable to all. Similarly the enduring popularity of the character spawned a host of re-telling and re-imaginings which greatly altered the details and even tone of the story while still upholding the inalienable and instantly recognisable core of the character. In the rich riotous medley of Arthurian legend throughout the Middle Ages, Arthur's association with Tintagel is one of the few points of continuity. According to Geoffrey, Arthur was conceived when Merlin in a horrifying and flagrantly irresponsible use of magic, transformed King Uther Pendragon into the form of his enemy Duke Gorlois of Cornwall so that he could infiltrate the Duke's great castle at Tintagel and sleep with his wife, Igraine. A problematic and uncomfortable origin to say the least for England's greatest hero. The immense tapestry of the flourishing Romance genre could often be a tangled affair and Tintagel also came to be associated with the Court of the duplicitous King Mark



Ruins of Tintagel Castle - photo by Colin Gregory



Photo by Warwick Conway

of Cornwall, in the widely celebrated medieval version of the ancient romance of Tristan and Iseult.

In 1233, Tintagel Castle which until now had existed only as a mis-remembered dream of a Dark Age palace complex was raised by Earl Richard of Cornwall and the nominal Count of hotly disputed Poitou. Ambitious and capable, yet frequently frustrated, Richard, born in 1209, was the second son of the cunning yet short sighted King John and grew up during the long reign of his elder brother Henry III. Despite the generous grant of the Earldom of Cornwall, Richard was an often problematic ally of his often struggling brother, for while he acted as Henry's lieutenant in both Wales and France, he was extremely touchy about his dignity, rebelling several times when he felt that it had been impinged upon.

Richard went to considerable expense to acquire Tintagel as the site of his new seat within the Earldom and it seems clear that the otherwise strategically and economically irrelevant Tintagel was selected for its Arthurian pedigree and its intertwined association with Cornish cultural and political autonomy. In order to emphasise and further project this affinity, Tintagel Castle was deliberately designed to be archaic by contemporary standards. These affectations served to boost Richard's own status within the wider European nobility and help woo his famously truculent and independently minded Cornish subjects. The Earl's love for romance literature and his recognition of its political utility perhaps informed the views of his nephew, the future Edward I who would decades later employ the legends of The Round Table as a way of increasing the flagging ranks of English knighthood and to build solidarity amongst his nobles.

Richard's long and distinguished career took him far away from the Castle he so carefully built, going on crusade in 1240 following the death of his wife, Isabel, the daughter of the famed William Marshall and in 1256 amidst rather confused and murky circumstances Richard was elected 'King of the Romans' by a majority of the German Dukes, although it seems the reality of the Dukes' relative strength and Richard's unorthodox position precluded him from wielding any real power within the Holy Roman Empire.

Following Richard's death in 1272, the Castle, the primary value of which was symbolic, was abandoned by his heirs and given to successive generations of sheriffs to administer in the course of their expansive and often profitable duties. While the Castle was used briefly as a prison, it swiftly fell into ruin. Upon his accession to the newly created Duchy of Cornwall in 1337, Edward the Black Prince, the legendary warrior son of Edward III visited the Castle and commissioned its repair and refurbishment but since he himself never spent any significant amount of time there and because the Castle still lacked any tangible significance, this proved only a halting measure with the Castle quickly sliding back into decay. There Tintagel languished, reduced to ruination until it was once again resurrected by its Arthurian connection in the Victorian era when the Castle of Arthur's birth ringing with the crash of the sea and open to the bite of the wind once again stoked the imagination of a nation.

Tintagel then does not derive its importance from the deeds performed within it or for the greatness of the lord that raised it, although great he was, rather Tintagel is an exemplar of the profound effect the self created mythology and chivalric pantheon had upon medieval aristocratic culture. It truly is a castle made from the stuff of dreams.

Warwick Castle

Raised amidst the settling dust of the Norman Conquest, the traditional seat of the Earldom of Warwick has continually throughout its millennia long and oft glorious history fundamentally reinvented itself, making it the Madonna of medieval military architecture. Growing steadily in the green and pleasant parkland in which it is set, Warwick Castle's rippling, ever changing, edifice has borne witness to much of the tumultuous political history of England, much of which authored by the great men and women that called the Castle home.

The seeds of Warwick Castle were sown in 914 during the first forging of England as a singular political entity when Æthelflæd, the Lady of Mercia and daughter of the celebrated Alfred the Great first fortified the site. The formidable Æthelflæd and her family were engaged in an extended campaign to fulfil their wilfully intertwined goals of unifying the fractured Anglo-Saxons and driving back the now settled and quite comfortable Viking invaders who had a generation before overrun much of Northern and Central England. Æthelflæd was a skilful tactician and inspiring leader who, following the death of her husband, ruled the former kingdom of Mercia in her own right; the defensive works at Warwick and others like it were an important element of her eventually vindicated Revanchists' strategy.

In 1068, following the Norman Conquest and the sundering of the relatively recently restored line of Wessex derived kings, William the Conqueror established a Motte and Bailey castle above the old Anglo-Saxon fortifications. Essentially an IKEA style flat-pack castle of piled earth and sturdy timbers, the erection of such castles at any and every opportunity was a classic play from the Norman's book on how to occupy territory and subjugate people and hundreds rose up like dragons teeth in the immediate aftermath of the Conquest.

In 1088, the Castle and the Earldom which became synonymous with it, was granted to Henry de Beaumont by King William Rufus as a reward for his service in the dynastic struggle between the King and his brother Robert Curthose, the Duke of Normandy who had enjoyed the support of much of the now cross-channel aristocracy. Henry was the son of Roger de Beaumont, famous for both his role as one of William's most trusted counsellors and bizarrely for the quality and luxuriousness of his beard. Between Henry, his elder brother Robert and their sons, the family formed one of the most powerful affinities in the freshly expanded Norman world.



A Corner of Warwick Castle
Photo by Barry Lewis / Wikimedia Commons

Much of this power was to be spent and ultimately squandered during the grinding, stuttering violence of the Anarchy, a dynastic dispute fought between two of the Conqueror's grandchildren, Empress Matilda and King Stephen which consumed England between 1135 and 1154. While his dynamic cousins, Robert the Earl of Leicester and Hereford and Waleran the Count of Meulan and Earl of Worcester delighted in the effective breakdown of royal authority dancing between the rival claimants and prosecuting their own private agendas, Earl Roger, Henry's son and successor, simply tried to ride out the storm. Hunkering down within his Castle and attempting to avoid notice as his lands were slowly devoured piecemeal by opportunistic neighbours.

Unfortunately for the pious and gentle Roger, in 1153 during one of his infrequent sojourns to the outside world, his wife handed Warwick Castle to the Empress' son, the future Henry II, causing the nerve ridden Earl to die of shock. This may well have been seen as a fair trade by the least sentimental of the Beaumont descendants, for the newly ascended King Henry took advantage of his brief custodianship of the Castle to rebuild it in stone. The Castle and Earldom was eventually restored to the Beaumont family and Roger's son where it rested until 1242 when following the death of Earl Thomas the title passed through his sister Margaret to her husband, the sometime sheriff of Oxfordshire, John Du Plessis.

1263 found England in the throes of the Second Barons' War fought in part to re-establish the Magna Carta and curb what were seen by many of the largely isolated aristocracy as excessive royal rights and capital raising powers. During the second year of the war, the Castle whose master, Earl William Maudit, a relative of Du Plessis's, had stayed loyal to Henry III was stormed by the dashing rebel leader and famed crusader Simon de Montfort. Both the Earl and his wife were captured and held for ransom in de Montfort's nearby Castle at Kenilworth while the walls of Warwick Castle were partially demolished in an attempt to deny such an important strategic resource to avenging supporters of the King.

In 1268, the old Earl, who had died the year previously, was succeeded by his nephew William de Beauchamp who would go on to be a close companion and trusted lieutenant of Edward I, also taking a leadership role in many of the domineering King's imperialistic wars. The Castle also served infamously, albeit briefly, as a prison during the turbulent and marred reign of Edward II when Earl Guy of Warwick captured Edward II's friend Piers Gaveston whose seeming monopoly of the material and temporal benefits of royal affinity made the unlucky courtier a lightning rod for the threatened nobility now brimming with discontent. Guy handed the royal favourite over to Edward's cousin and only rival in wealth or power, Earl Thomas of Lancaster, who later that year in 1312 had him executed following a perfunctory show trial.

Perhaps inspired by the increasingly dangerous tempo of English politics over the last few generations or as a result of a more acute awareness of his increased status, Guy's son and successor, Thomas, embarked upon an extensive modernisation of the Castle's defences, rebuilding its northern wall with the addition of a bulging and fortified gatehouse and raising a network of great towers around the Castle's perimeter which featured several architectural innovations derived from the Continent. It is fitting and perhaps unsurprising that Warwick Castle was to gain many of its most obvious and lasting military attributes under Thomas' tenure for he was perhaps the most militarily proficient Earl to dwell there. A close friend of the glory hungry and driven Edward III, Thomas served as the Marshall of England. He commanded one of three English battalions during the resounding victory at Crecy before

going on to further glories serving as a mentor to the Black Prince during his brutally effective chevauchée of 1356 prior to fighting at the Battle of Poitiers during the campaign's culmination.

When Henry de Beauchamp, the childhood friend of Henry VI died in 1446 with no immediate male heir, the stage was set for the Castle's most famous and notorious inhabitant, Richard Neville 'The Kingmaker.' Gaining the Earldom through marriage to Henry's sister Anne in 1449, Richard was already part of a powerful northern affinity; the son of the Earl of Salisbury and related through marriage to the Duke of York, the Earl was to play a pivotal role in the fratricide strewn War of the Roses. Warwick was a firm supporter of his uncle Richard of York's attempts to step in and exercise royal power on behalf of his then catatonic family member, King Henry VI. However, this brought the Duke and his emerging affinity into open conflict with another faction of royal ministers and relatives led by the King's wife Margaret of Anjou and the Duke of Somerset. Worse still, upon Henry's recovery it became clear that his trust remained with Somerset and that the King saw York's attempts to seize power in his absence as deeply threatening. Now isolated from royal support and threatened himself, Duke Richard felt that his only chance for survival was to persevere in his attempts to forcibly remove the pliant King from the custody of his rivals, sparking another spasm of violence throughout the kingdom in which he was aided by the cunning and redoubtable Warwick. Following the Duke of York's death at the Battle of Wakefield, the Earl declared his cousin, Edward Plantagenet the rightful King. The mainstay of the Yorkist war effort, he guided the young and talented King to victory whereby he firmly established himself as the foremost royal minister and most powerful noble within the land. However, Richard feeling that he was becoming increasingly excluded from royal favour and the mechanisms of power following the King's generous patronage of his new bride's vast cohort of relatives soon turned against the victorious Edward throwing his considerable power behind a Lancastrian rival. He was joined temporarily in this rebellion by his son-in-law the Duke of Clarence, a particularly grievous blow for the embattled Edward given that the Duke was his younger brother. This breaking of faith was ultimately to prove a fatal mistake; the mercurial Clarence defected yet again and 'The Kingmaker' was slain at the Battle of Barnet.

During the War of the Three Kingdoms, the dilapidated Castle was refurbished and refortified as a Parliamentary stronghold and successfully endured a Royalist siege. From this point on, the Castle served largely as a stately home to the Greville family, although they struggled with the financial burden presented by the Castle and the continuing battle to modernise it in an evolving economy. In 1976 the Greville family sold the Castle to the Tussauds Group after which it fell into the clutches of Merlin Entertainment, the site's current managers, where Warwick nestles comfortably amongst its portfolio of equally crucial historical and cultural landmarks such as Alton Towers and LEGOLAND.

Set beside the gently meandering River Avon, amidst breezy emerald parkland and raiment of peacock strewn gardens, Warwick Castle is blessed with one of the most pleasant settings enjoyed by any English Castle. The sprung bow of the Castle's singular curtain wall rising above the defensive ditch and soaring machicolated towers almost grotesque in their size, is an imposing sight; their sheer high and bulky early modern gate houses, psychologically at least, compensating for any lack of depth. Sheltered behind the curve of the wall and nestled against the river are the Castle's sumptuous manor-like residential buildings erected far later than the rest of the Castle and refurbished and remodelled many times. They are

crafted with sufficient levels of architectural synergy that they do not appear visually disruptive to the older curtain wall. Both the Great Hall and State rooms display a cornucopia of historical artefacts. Overlooking the rest of the Castle is the ancient Æthelflæds Mound upon the fastness of which stands the remains of the Castle's original stone keep which now plays home to part of the highly popular Horrible Histories Stormin' Normans Experience where children are inducted into the mysteries of Norman soldiery. This goal is achieved through the distribution and subsequent swinging around of large wooden poles which no doubt contributes to its enduring popularity with its target audience and widespread despair amongst their parents.

The fact that children still play at and dream of being knights in the shelter of the ever adaptable Warwick Castle highlights one of the paradoxes of history. Which is that the context emphasises the extent of our removal from our medieval forebearers while the act itself illuminates an unyielding similarity.



**Warwick Castle engraving by William Miller for a novel by Walter Scott.
in 1842.**

Windsor Castle

At one time the greatest palace complex in Europe and a favoured haunt of the British Royal family to this day, Windsor Castle is a still living relic of a time where out of necessity, the sum of a nation's sovereignty and a State's very existence as a politically distinct identity rested upon a crowned head. In England, more often than not the place where that crowned head rested was Windsor Castle. Emerging out of the bedlam and cultivated political distortion that followed the Norman Conquest, Windsor Castle would gradually blossom into a magnificent and much favoured royal residence cultivated by the successive generations of monarchs who dwelt within it.

While its face and form have undergone almost continual revision to better reflect the perceived or claimed glories of its patrons and to adhere to the advancing demands of luxury and fashion, the Castle has enjoyed a remarkable continuity of purpose. Transitioning by degrees from military installation to royal palace, Windsor has at one time or another housed the Court or personage of every English and later, after the Union of Crowns, British King or Queen.

In addition to serving as one of the principal and most prized residences of the foci of the medieval political community in the high Middle Ages, under the direction of one of Europe's greatest warrior Kings, Windsor through its role as the centre of England's Chivalric and martial cult was transformed into a powerful tool for the consolidation of Royal authority and England's temporal power. The ideological and constitutional role of the Monarchy has, like all social institutions and values, waxed, waned and been heavily altered since its heyday, yet Windsor Castle in which so much of their history is anchored, well articulates and preserves what potency remains.

Considering its current splendour and the long, rich history that stretched out before it, Windsor Castle has humble, rather grubby, origins. While William the Conqueror was crowned King of England in 1066 following his bloody victory at the Battle of Hastings, a great deal of the actual nitty gritty of conquering took place in the years following his coronation. The occupation of England by the new and land hungry Normans was a tumultuous and muddled affair complicated by the presence of an entrenched and still functional political elite. There were a substantial number of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Danish Earls who had not been present at Hastings and for whom, alongside the Anglo-Saxon



View of Windsor Castle from 1853

dominated church, the grudging acknowledgement of William's status following a tense period of negotiations was vastly different from genuine acceptance. These remnants of the old elite would only be replaced haphazardly over the following decades following a series of unaffiliated and often selfishly motivated rebellions.

Almost as dangerous to King William's person and the establishment of any form of coherent governance was William's now largely dispersed army composed not just of his liege men in Normandy but also mercenary adventurers, desperate nobility and brigands from his often hostile neighbours over whom he now had to exert control. In order to safeguard his hard won acquisitions and as a way to transmit his will throughout the country, as he bent the full powers of his brilliance and casual brutality to its governance, William embarked upon a great spree of castle building. Windsor was part of a network of largely temporary castles guarding the approach to London, the site being chosen for its strategic value overlooking the Thames as well as its location nearby an Anglo-Saxon royal hunting lodge and its accompanying forest which as the draconian Norman forestry laws can attest to, was a major source of royal income. Partly because of the amount of resources they consumed and partly because of the limitations of communication technology for much of the middle ages, Royal Courts were nomadic in nature travelling from royal centre to royal centre but despite his extremely active kingship and continued sojourns through his newly won country, William never visited the then spartan Windsor himself. Nor was it particularly favoured during the reign of his second son and immediate successor, William Rufus. The Castle being ignored in favour of the nearby hunting lodge of Old Windsor and William's pet project, Westminster Palace into which he poured a surfeit of resources.

The Castle first attracted royal affinity, which it enjoys to this day, during the reign of the last of the Conqueror's sons, the savagely intelligent and politically methodical Henry I who greatly expanded the Castle, furnishing it with a stone keep where he held his Pentecost Court in 1110 and creating a new burgh at the Castle's feet, effectively abandoning Old Windsor. In 1121, the already picturesque Windsor was chosen by Henry as the venue for his marriage to Adela, the daughter of the Duke of the Lower Lorraine.

During the reign of the energetic Henry II, the Castle underwent further fortification and renovation replacing the wooden palisade with a new stone curtain wall as well as rebuilding the royal apartments and the central keep. When Henry's son, Richard I was captured and held for ransom by his old rival, Duke Leopold of Austria, while returning from the Third Crusade, his younger brother the unscrupulous Prince John seized Windsor Castle, seeking to use Richard's capture as a chance to co-opt the royal authority the Castle already represented. However, John was swiftly compelled to vacate the Castle by the timely intervention of their mother, the formidable Eleanor of Aquitaine. During John's own turbulent reign, succeeding to the throne over the body of his second brother Geoffrey's son, Arthur of Brittany, Windsor was his favourite residence and he went to some expense to remodel and expand the royal apartments there.

As a result of John's now legendary quarrels with his barons, the Castle was besieged in 1214 and later served as his base of operations during the period running up to his reluctant signing of the Magna Carta. Following John's perhaps short-sighted attempts to enact bloody vengeance on the offending barons, elements of the nobility invited Prince Louis of France to invade and claim the English throne. As a result of this, the Castle once again came under siege in 1216 when a French army led by the Count of Nevers was heroically repelled by

the Castle's sixty strong garrison. John's son, Henry III's tenure as King saw yet more momentous change to the structure of Windsor Castle including the erection of a great sweeping wall to cover the Castle's vulnerable lower ward, a structural weakness that had almost proved disastrous in the siege of 1216. Henry also invested a staggering amount of money on the Castle's domestic paraphernalia, creating a new Great Hall and remodelling and refurbishing the royal apartments for use by his young wife Eleanor of Provence, creating a palace of staggering opulence and refinement.

Edward III was born within the walls of Windsor Castle in 1312 during the aftermath of one of the great upheavals of his father Edward II's reign in which the King's friend and advisor, Piers Gaveston, had been arrested and executed by several outraged prominent members of the nobility worried they were being isolated from the levers of power by the royal favourite. Edward III was a dynamic and driven personality, a dreamer and romantic with the verve to pursue his vision. He became one of England's most successful warrior Kings. Although crowned in 1327, the young Edward only began to exercise power for himself in 1330 when he, alongside his childhood friends, stormed Nottingham Castle imprisoning his mother and her partner, Roger Mortimer, who had been acting as co-Regents. Following his assumption of royal authority, Edward threw himself into the reignited Second War of Scottish Independence, resurrecting his grandfather Edward I's plan to support the Balliol claim to the Scottish throne in exchange for acknowledgement of English overlordship. Following several stunning victories and then a slow seemingly irreversible decay in the English position in Scotland, Edward began to pursue a claim to the kingship of France he held through his mother Isabella, daughter of the last Capetian King Philip IV, commencing the bloody and trudging conflict that came to be known as the Hundred Years War.

In the place of his birth, Windsor Castle, Edward, a fanatical devotee of chivalric culture and its accompanying pageantry, founded or perhaps in his mind renewed the Order of the Round Table. The tales of the Arthurian canon were the blockbusters of their day, read, enjoyed and obsessed over by the largely culturally homogeneous European nobility. Arthur was one of the nine worthies of chivalric lore, a universally acknowledged paragon of valour and virtue. Round Table Tournaments in which participants wore lavish Arthurian inspired costumes and re-enacted exploits derived from romance literature were widely popular throughout Europe. In England, however, this reverence for and emulation of Arthur and his knights took on a greater resonance, after all, Arthur had been an English King.

Moreover, an English King who had conquered the entirety of the British Isles and established a great empire within Europe, twin dreams which had burnt long and deep within the English national psyche and its Norman derived monarchy. The aristocrats and knights of England were the legendary Arthur's heirs and he a symbol of a lost age of martial valour and temporal power. When Edward created the Order of the Round Table in Windsor in 1344, amidst a fountaining of pomp and ceremony, he was not only presenting himself as Arthur's successor but also building political and cultural solidarity, harnessing the English nobility to his military ambitions through their shared legends and aspirations. Edward III would use the now Arthurian steeped Windsor Castle as a shrine to the cult of Chivalry, reigniting English ardour and ambition, rallying the often fractious nobility about himself and mobilising the nation for war.

While the Order of the Round Table, despite the colossal home he built for it in Windsor, faltered, much like his early attempts to prosecute war in France, largely due to a deficit of

funds, Edward persevered and his propaganda swiftly took root. The Order was remoulded and refined by a slightly older and wiser Edward in 1348 into the Order of the Garter, much reduced from the initial three hundred strong Round Table to a mere twenty four. The new Order was to be a command cadre composed of the most distinguished veterans of Edward's victorious campaigns and capable of overseeing and enacting the completion of the war. Meeting regularly, the Order of the Garter became one of England's most prestigious institutions housed in the great custom built Chapel of Windsor Castle and has continued with varying levels of enthusiasm and earnestness by his successors. In large part to make it more suitable for his chivalric enterprises and in order to celebrate and reflect his triumphs in France, Edward embarked upon a truly massive building project at Windsor, expending a vast fortune creating a great palace complex in which he intended to relax and recover from the taxing business of ruling both France and England.

Windsor continued to be an important royal centre in the approaching dusk of the middle ages with both Henry IV and Henry V often holding court and entertaining foreign dignitaries there; the most prominent being Emperor Sigismund in 1417. In 1421, the unfortunate Henry VI was born in the Castle, although his long minority saw a dispersal of English political unity and a waning of the Order of the Garter, one of the key tools for Windsor's upkeep. This position was reversed somewhat by Edward IV another chivalricly-minded warrior King who proudly traced his ancestry back to Arthur, firstly through his links to the Mortimer family and then through them to the Welsh Princes. It was during his reign that the new Chapel of St. George in which the Order is based to this day was constructed. A revival further encouraged by his Lancastrian rival and dynastic successor, Henry VII. For both Kings, who dwelt extensively in Windsor, the Order of the Garter and Windsor's Arthurian connotations were used not to mobilise for war but rather to build a sense of conformity and unity following the ravages of the War of the Roses. As Windsor sailed smoothly past the middle ages into the modern era it has continued to be an important royal centre and residence of the successive ranks of the British monarchy, enduring wars, revolutions and depositions, all the way down to the current day. Yet increasingly as the tempo and philosophy of governance changed and dare I say improved, Windsor took up a more cursory role in history, a symbol of royalty by mere dint of association rather than the manifestation of royal power and English ideological solidarity that it had once been.

While centuries of revisions and refurbishment have taken Windsor far from its original military role, the palatial Castle is truly a work of art and remains an icon of Britishness.

Conclusion

There we have it then, ten Castles which through the weight their shadow cast on the landscape and the events centred upon them, altered the oscillating contours of Medieval Britain's political fabric and to a greater or lesser degree shaped history around them. The origins of the various Castles explored here are as diverse as their disparate forms and they range across a vast chronological reserve. Some have truly ancient roots set deep into the shrouded past of Dark Age Britain before their medieval rebirth, the exact distinction between a castle and earlier fortresses is a fractious one ill represented and indistinct. Others were only constructed or came to prominence long after the Norman Conquest when the concrete of both Anglo-Norman society and the Norman influenced Welsh and Scottish aristocracies had set. For all the crudeness and brutality of the castle's nominal origins in the badlands of post Carolingian collapse, European castles evolved to occupy a complex and multifaceted position in medieval society. The castle's most obvious attribute is its formidable defensive capabilities, the scale and artistry of which rose steadily as the Middle Ages marched onwards in reaction to the increasingly sophisticated technology and devious stratagems employed against them, until finally after a valiant struggle they were surpassed by the refinement of gunpowder weaponry.

Perhaps this point is best represented through a recounting of the histories of Stirling and Dover Castles, two of their respective nations mightiest fortresses constructed at crucial junctures, both of which proved an invaluable bulwark to the monarchies which constructed them, enduring sieges from both their recalcitrant aristocrats and foreign invaders. However, the castle's greatest value militarily was the ability to project military power and the authority which soon follows this throughout the castle's immediate hinterlands. Far from a bolthole, the castle was a mailed fist. Such was the role of almost all the featured castles born from the chaos of the Norman Conquest, even palatial Windsor Castle, soon to enjoy an almost un-paralleled Royal affinity, was originally founded as a means of protecting the Thames valley from Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Danish dissidents. Pembroke Castle, created on the ragged edge of the Norman Empire deep in southern Wales aptly demonstrates the effectiveness and universality of this practice; a powerful and enduring province growing up from the Castle that stood at its centre, despite the absence of the albeit grudgingly acquiescent administrative apparatus the Normans co-opted throughout their lands.

The height of medieval engineering achievement and the largest construction projects of their age (with the probable exception of cathedrals which were castles of God and thus sort of still count), after moving past the era of the motte and bailey, the mere construction of a castle was a staggeringly expensive enterprise articulating the temporal power and ambitions of its patron. Architecture has long been a method of communication as much as a mean to keep the rain off its builders' heads and in a largely illiterate age where many of the social and political interfaces were decked with symbolism, this effect was even more profound and keenly perceived than it is today. This use of the castle as a tool of propaganda can be seen in Dunstanburgh Castle, constructed as a lavish alternative court in competition with its royal counterpart, as well as in the stark walls of Caernarfon raised to articulate English imperial power and dominance.

Given the kaleidoscopic history of Medieval Britain with its constantly crashing and distorting factions and conflicts in which the castle stands so tall, its role as a home can be overshadowed. It's often hard to imagine castles as living, breathing communities in which people actually lived. It is not just the ruination, caused by time or human interference, in which the majority of surviving castles languish which creates this disconnect, although it certainly doesn't help. Rather to my mind, at least, it is their monolithic qualities and the sheer Spartan utility of form. It is easy and exciting to envisage a castle as a great predatory bird perched on the horizon controlling all it surveys, its mere existence a promise of violence yet to come. It is somewhat harder to imagine them as a place where people put their feet up and gossiped after a hard day engaging in or supervising back-breaking labour. Castles contained a microcosm of medieval society; normally comprising representatives of both the idealised neo classical Three Orders, those who pray, those who fight and those who work, as well as messy but convenient groups like stewards, tradesman and merchants. A castle then, far from merely the last and grandest vestiges of a rather nasty and best forgotten age, can be a powerfully instructive tool, brimming with the secrets of lifestyles, some lavish, some humble, long since lived.