

Castles

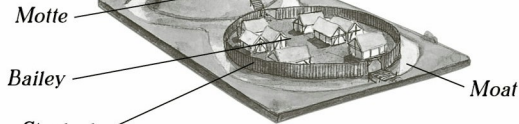
A Very Peculiar

History

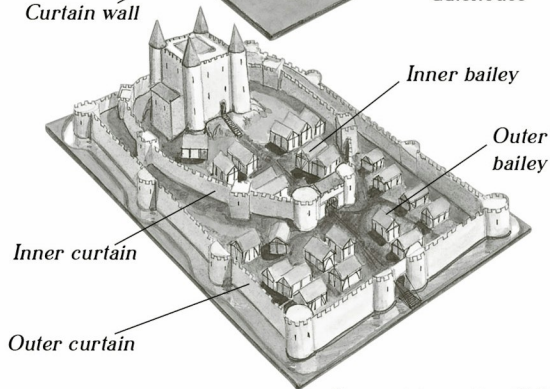
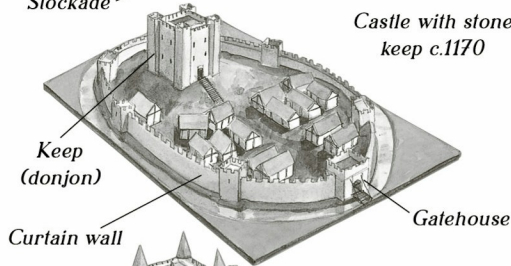


Castles through the ages

Wooden tower
Motte and bailey castle
c.1070



Stockade
Castle with stone
keep c.1170



Concentric castle c.1300

Introduction

What makes a castle
a castle?



We all think we know what a castle is: a big old stone building with battlements, and usually in ruins because people stopped having any use for them ages ago.

But if you'd been living in England around 1050, when it still belonged to the Saxons, you wouldn't have known how to answer. You'd almost certainly never seen a castle – but you'd heard about them, and you didn't like what you'd heard. They were some newfangled type of building that King Edward the Confessor was letting his French cronies put on the Welsh borders.

Castles A Very Peculiar History

When the king had trouble with his English earls, he'd invited French friends over (he'd been brought up in Normandy) and put them in top jobs. He'd given them land where they'd been putting up private fortifications (they had a French word for them: *chastel* - 'castle'.) And when they were well dug in they'd been riding out and terrorising local people.

That's the definition of a castle. It's the private dwelling of a lord or king, that provides him with a safe, fortified base from which he and his fighting men can keep the upper hand over everyone else in the neighbourhood.

The English monk who recorded the castle-building fad of these foreigners (in his chronicle for the year 1051) had no doubt that it was a bad thing. Saxon and Viking fortifications had been communal efforts, protecting whole towns or settlements against a common enemy. These new castles were private 'me-against-you' affairs. And they had come to stay.

The coming of castles

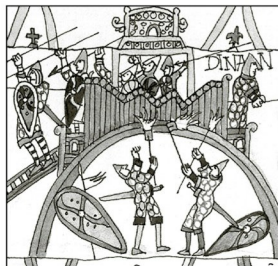


Castles were the means by which William the Conqueror controlled the English kingdom he had won at the battle of Hastings in 1066. He rewarded the Norman barons who'd backed him by giving them large estates and encouraging them to protect their property - and dishearten the locals - by building castles there. Castles gave you clout. Of course, William granted the land on the strict condition that the barons continued to support him as king and to acknowledge that he was the real owner of the entire country. Over 500 castles sprouted in England during his reign.

What did the first castles look like?

At its simplest, a castle was a timber building surrounded by a ditch and an earth rampart. In grander examples, the timber building was a tower set on a man-made mound of earth, called a 'motte'. The top of the mound had a strong fence around it, and its base was protected by the ditch formed when earth was dug out to make the motte.

A wooden bridge linked the motte with a larger enclosure called the 'bailey'. This contained several smaller buildings and also had a surrounding ditch. Earth was piled up on its inner side to form a bank topped by a fearsome row of stakes.



A scene from the Bayeux Tapestry shows soldiers attacking a castle motte.

How to make a motte

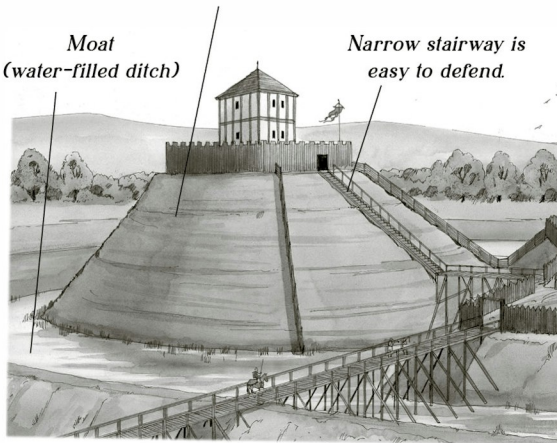
It wouldn't be any good just piling up soil, which would be washed away in the first downpour. You need plenty of hard material well bonded together.

Archaeologists have excavated mottes and found that they were built of alternating layers of different materials, rammed down hard: a layer of soil topped by a layer of stone or shingle, then another layer of soil, and so on.

Steep sides make it difficult for attackers to climb the motte.

*Moat
(water-filled ditch)*

*Narrow stairway is
easy to defend.*



A flat-pack castle?

When William landed on Pevensey beach in Sussex in September 1066, his first concern was to establish a safe base. For this he needed a castle, and quickly. A twelfth-century chronicler says he brought it with him. The writer wasn't an eyewitness, but he may well have been right. It makes sense. When you've just landed in hostile territory you don't want to start felling trees and cutting them to size in full view of the enemy. Shipping pre-cut timbers would save valuable time.

After William's victory at Hastings the people of London took the prudent course and surrendered the city to him. He immediately started a castle there, too. It was the usual earth and timber affair, but within twelve years he had set about replacing it with a massive square tower of stone 27 metres high. It must have seemed a skyscraper to the English, who were used to single-storey wooden buildings.

Building in stone took longer and cost much more than wood, but a stone tower was stronger

than a wooden one and made a much more intimidating statement. Stone castles had already appeared on the continent and this was to be the way forward in England too.

The main stone tower of a castle is now called its *keep*, though the Normans called it a *donjon* (which doesn't mean that it was a dungeon, even though it was a good place for holding people prisoner). It provided living quarters for the owner and his family, a safe retreat in times of danger and, above all, a vantage point from which to survey and control the surrounding land.

As a security measure, the entrance to the keep was on the first floor, with a removable wooden stairway outside. The ground floor was used for storage and there were two or three floors of living space above. The first floor was the grand reception hall, which might be divided by a cross-wall into a public hall and a more private chamber. Above were similar rooms for the lord and his family. There were sometimes chambers made in the depth of the walls, which were very thick. Spiral stairs led up and down.