

British Castles

December 2023



Christmas at the Great Castles of Britain

from a Medieval Christmas to modern celebrations



EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

Welcome to the December edition of 'British Castles' magazine.

To open this issue, as it's the festive season, we've stepped back in time back to see how Christmas was celebrated in Medieval England.

Take our quiz to see how many castle photos you can match to the castle's name. All our castles this month are in England.

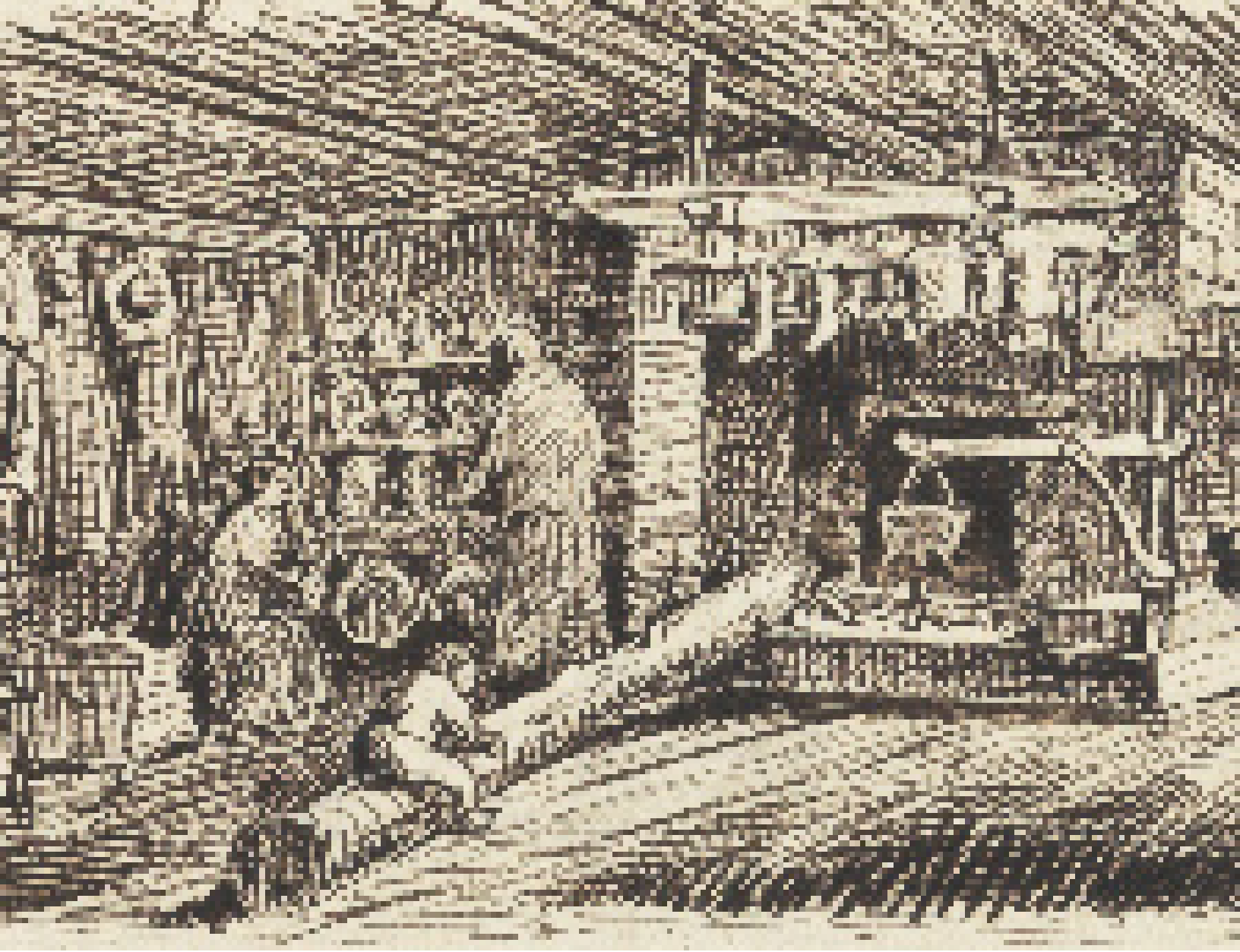
Our second feature looks at the beautiful Castle Howard. By castle standards, it's nearly a new-build, but this 18th Century masterpiece is one of England's most impressive country estates.

And in our final feature we profile people closely associated with British castle building. This month we meet the architect Nicholas Hawksmoor – a student of Christopher Wren whose Baroque designs left an indelible mark on the British landscape.

Enjoy our latest issue, and have a wonderful Christmas season.

Until next time

Chris



A MEDIEVAL CHRISTMAS

CELEBRATIONS FROM A DISTANT TIME

Winter festivals were popular in Europe long before the birth of Christ. Over time, the Roman Saturnalia the Pagan Winter Solstice and the Germanic festival of Yule all became absorbed into the Christian calendar. Christ's birth had long been major fixture of the church calendar, although the Epiphany, on January 6th, was more popular, celebrating the visit of the Three Wise Men. But in the 11th Century, the Old English term 'Christes Maesse' – festival of Christ – first appeared in English and Christmas itself was born. Between the years 1000 and 1300, Christmas became the biggest celebration in Europe



Unlike today's grand commercialised celebrations the medieval Yuletide season was marked by a tapestry of traditions, customs, and religious observances that reflected the social and cultural fabric of the time.

RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE

At the core of medieval Christmas celebrations was its deep religious significance. The Church played a central role in shaping the festivities, and the celebration of Mass, especially the midnight Mass, was a focal point, drawing communities together in prayer and reflection.

Advent—the period of anticipation leading up to

Christmas—set the tone for the season. It was a time of fasting and spiritual preparation, with Christians engaging in acts of penance and reflection. The Advent wreath, adorned with candles symbolising hope, peace, joy, and love, appeared everywhere in the countdown to the Nativity.

FEASTING AND MERRIMENT

While religious observances were paramount, Christmas in medieval England retained the merriment and feasts of the winter festivals that came before it. The festive season provided some respite from the toils of daily life, and the feasts were an occasion for communal bonding. In wealthy

Left: The Medieval Christmas Fair at Ludlow Castle.

Right: A Medieval Christmas reenactment at Lancaster Castle



houses, the medieval banquet table groaned under the weight of rich, hearty dishes, featuring meats such as boar, venison, and goose, along with seasonal fruits and vegetables.

Mince pies, a medieval delicacy, were filled with a mixture of minced meat, suet, and spices. The food was complemented by ale and mead, flowing freely to enhance the revelry. Festive games, entertainment and dancing, added to the atmosphere, and mummer's plays took place throughout the country – a form of

folk theatre like an early pantomime.

DECORATION AND GREENERY

Homes and churches were decorated with greenery and natural elements. Evergreens like holly, ivy, and mistletoe represented life and renewal during winter's dormancy. The vibrant red berries of holly and the glossy leaves of ivy added a splash of colour to the otherwise monochrome landscape, while

mistletoe carried with it a sense of magic and ritual.

Candles, representing the light of Christ, were lit everywhere and the Yule log – a massive piece of wood typically from an oak tree – was ceremonially lit on Christmas Eve. Originally a pagan tradition from the winter solstice, its flames symbolised the triumph of light over darkness, a powerful metaphor in the mind of medieval believers.

Bringing in the boar's head for the Christmas feast

GIFT-GIVING AND GENEROSITY

The giving and receiving of Christmas gifts in medieval England was rooted in the spirit of generosity and charity. Nobles and employers bestowed gifts – food, animals, clothes or money – upon their workers, and reciprocal gestures of goodwill were exchanged throughout the land. Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, evolved during this era, where the wealthy would distribute alms and charitable donations to the less fortunate.

Medieval England's social structure influenced the gifting, with nobles exchanging elaborate presents, often including finely crafted items or rare commodities. For the common folk, gifts were more modest, such as handmade trinkets or practical items like warm clothing.

CAROLS AND MUSIC

Medieval Christmas celebrations were incomplete without festive music. Wassailers – singing groups, often accompanied by musicians playing traditional instruments, would roam the streets, bringing joyous tunes and



early carols to households. Traditionally this took place on twelfth night, when the singers roamed from house to house expressing merriment and collecting charity while also conveying religious themes, celebrating Christ's birth.

The festivities of Medieval England may feel like a distant land compared with the huge, multicultural, commercial celebrations of today, but it's a time when many seeds were sown that put down the roots of our modern Christmas traditions. So even if some of the attitudes of the time feel a million miles from today's world, a thousand years on and we're still a long way from peace on earth and goodwill to all. Perhaps we haven't come as far as we might think.

ENGLISH CASTLES QUIZ

How many of the following castles can you match with its photo? Answers on page 24.

Arundel Castle

Dudley Castle

Carisbrooke Castle;

Bramber Castle

Windsor Castle

Corfe Castle

Lincoln Castle

Belvoir Castle

Edlingham Castle

Nottingham Castle

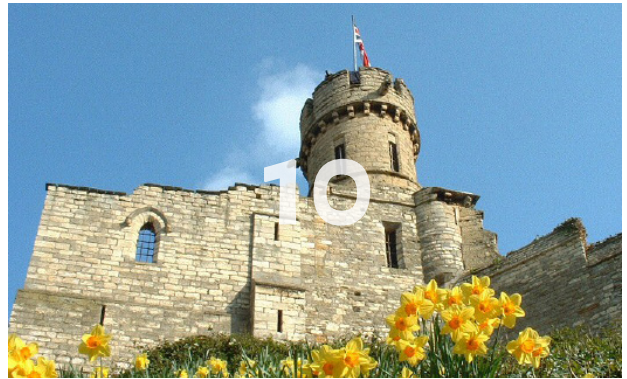
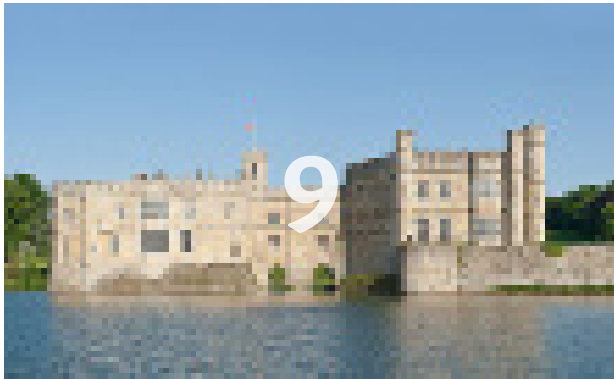
Leeds Castle

Tattershall Castle

Hever Castle

Bodiam Castle





A large, ornate Christmas tree stands in the center of a grand hall. The tree is covered in white snow-like decorations and numerous warm white lights. Above the tree, a large, ornate dome with a frescoed ceiling and gold leaf accents is visible. The walls of the hall are also decorated with murals and gold leaf. The overall atmosphere is festive and grand.

GALLERY: CASTLES AT CHRISTMAS

Castle Howard

Cardiff Castle





Kenilworth Castle



Croft Castle



Alnwick Castle

Edinburgh Castle





Lulworth Castle



Castle Howard's grand baroque facade

CASTLE HOWARD

A GRAND HOUSE OF HISTORY AND OPULENCE

In the rolling countryside of North Yorkshire, magnificent Castle Howard's roots date back to the 18th century. From its grandiose architecture to the carefully curated gardens, the house remains home to the Howard family, who open their doors to the public to preserve this national treasure for future generations.

A STATELY ORIGIN

The story of Castle Howard begins in 1699 when Charles Howard, the 3rd Earl of Carlisle, commissioned his friend, Sir John Vanbrugh to design a residence that would reflect the family's wealth and status. Vanbrugh was a well-known



Castle Howard's principal architect,
Sir John Vanbrugh

dramatist who had never designed a house before and he had no formal architectural training. But his baroque sensibilities and his palatial ambition were enabled by his close relationship with the talented and established architect, Nicholas Hawksmoor. Hawksmoor was a close associate and protégé of Sir Christopher Wren and he partnered with Vanbrugh on some of the most spectacular buildings of the era. Hawksmoor brought technical knowhow and a classical vision to Vanbrugh's exuberant baroque imagination, and together they created buildings including the epic Blenheim Palace. You can read more about Nicholas Hawksmoor, our Great Castle Builder, on p21. Construction began at Castle Howard in 1701, but due to a series of challenges – including financial constraints and the death of both the architect and the Earl – it took many decades to complete.

The result, however, was astonishing. Castle Howard's facade blends Palladian and baroque styles, with a central dome crowning the structure. With 145 rooms and vast landscaped surrounds, Castle Howard remains one of England's most iconic landmarks and is recognisable from countless film and TV appearances.

A PLACE IN HISTORY

The aristocratic Howard family has occupied the castle since it was first conceived. The estate has played host to various dignitaries and royalty, and



Castle Howard Great Hall



Left: The ceiling of the Great Hall

Above: The beautiful landscaped gardens of Castle Howard

its interiors showcase a vast array of art and furnishings, including artworks by Sir Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough.

During World War II, Castle Howard opened its doors to serve as a convalescent home for wounded soldiers. The stately rooms that once echoed with the laughter of nobility became a place of healing and respite during a tumultuous time.

GARDENS AND GROUNDS

The house's opulence extends beyond its walls into the meticulously landscaped gardens and grounds. Designed by Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor, the gardens at Castle



Howard are a living testament to the design sensibilities of the time with ornate fountains, serene lakes, a grand mausoleum and a temple dedicated to the Four Winds.

The Walled Garden, the Rose Garden, and the Atlas Fountain are just a few of the features that make Castle Howard's grounds such a Mecca for landscape lovers. The gardens offer a tranquil backdrop for leisurely strolls and are a huge draw for visitors from around the world.

Above: The Mausoleum in the Castle Howard grounds was entirely designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor.

Right: Fireworks at Castle Howard are a popular annual event

CHRISTMAS AT CASTLE HOWARD

As the festive season descends, the historic estate transforms into a winter wonderland, offering visitors a unique blend of tradition and enchantment. The Christmas festivities have become a popular annual tradition, attracting locals and tourists alike.

The grand house takes on a magical quality during the Christmas season. The halls are decked with festive decorations, and each room is adorned with elaborate Christmas trees, flickering candles, and seasonal greenery. The castle's baroque architecture is enhanced by an enchanting light display, and one of the highlights is the Christmas Masquerade. This event invites visitors to step back in time and experience the elegance of a bygone era.

PRESERVATION AND LEGACY

The Howard family's commitment to maintaining the estate's historical integrity ensures that future generations can continue to appreciate its architectural splendour and its place in British cultural life.

Like many of Britain's grand country houses, the house is open to the public,

attracting more than a quarter of a million visitors a year to explore its rich history, wander through its lush gardens, and partake in the festivities that accompany the changing seasons. The estate has diversified over the years to offer a huge range of cultural, historic, artistic and culinary events – all while remaining a family home whose current custodians, the Hon. Nick Howard and his wife, Victoria, continue to manage the estate to secure it for future generations.



Nicholas Hawksmoor became synonymous with the Baroque extravagance that adorned England during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Born in Nottinghamshire in 1661, Hawksmoor emerged as a prominent architect, whose distinctive style blended classical influences with innovative design. While his work on London churches – including the huge West towers of Westminster Abbey – and on the universities of Oxford and Cambridge are his most widely celebrated and recognisable achievements, his work on some of Britain's grandest country houses helped to create some of the most splendid buildings of his day, including Castle Howard and the colossal Blenheim Palace.

GREAT CASTLE BUILDERS FROM BRITISH HISTORY

NICHOLAS HAWKSMOOR.
AN ARCHITECTURAL VISIONARY

EARLY YEARS AND TRAINING

Hawksmoor's route into architecture began with an apprenticeship to the superstar of his day, Sir Christopher Wren.

Wren, a polymath of the 17th century, was not only an architect but also a mathematician, astronomer, and physicist. His architectural career was marked by his ability to blend classical principles with innovative design and a phenomenal eye for proportion – skills that undoubtedly influenced Hawksmoor as he developed his own style.



Bust of Nicholas Hawksmoor



Under Wren's mentorship, Hawksmoor was exposed to the intricacies of classical architecture, symmetry, and ornamental detailing. The classical tradition, emphasising rationality and order, would become evident in Hawksmoor's later works, as he absorbed and reinterpreted Wren's emphasis on geometric clarity and harmony.

Wren's magnum opus, St. Paul's Cathedral in London, marked the pinnacle of Wren's architectural vision. The cathedral's monumental dome and restrained ornamentation showcased his classical sensibilities, while incorporating elements of the emerging Baroque style. Hawksmoor's apprenticeship under Wren exposed him not only to the technical discipline of architecture but also to the broader intellectual currents of the time.

Wren's scientific pursuits, including his contributions to astronomy and physics, set the stage for Hawksmoor's multidimensional approach to architecture.

A FUSION OF BAROQUE AND CLASSICISM

Hawksmoor evolved a distinctive style fusing a carefully handled Baroque exuberance with classical proportions. The new Baroque ideas, characterised by dynamism, emotional intensity and grand theatricality, gained nuance and control under Hawksmoor's hand and he quickly caught the attention of a wealthy aristocracy, at a time when huge, statement country houses were springing up around the country.



Blenheim Palace – the grand approach



Hawksmoor's great mentor,
Sir Christopher Wren

EASTON NESTON – A TRIUMPH OF DESIGN

One of Hawksmoor's most celebrated commissions is Easton Neston in Northamptonshire. Working for Sir William Fermor in the late 17th century, this grand estate was a showcase of the young architect's novel style. The house's imposing façade, with its Corinthian columns and intricate detailing, exuded a sense of grandeur that became hallmark's of a Hawksmoor design.

The interiors of Easton Neston were equally impressive, featuring spacious halls adorned with stately mouldings and elaborate plasterwork. Hawksmoor's meticulous attention to detail and his ability to balance the monumental with the refined, transformed Easton Neston – now recognised as a masterpiece of its day.

CASTLE HOWARD AND BLENHEIM PALACE

Perhaps Hawksmoor's most enduring contributions to the realm of castles and grand houses are Castle Howard, situated in North Yorkshire and Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire.

Partnering with his friend, chief architect Sir John Vanbrugh, Hawksmoor's influence on Castle Howard is unmistakable, particularly in the design of the iconic dome that crowns the structure. The dome, a hallmark of Hawksmoor's architectural language, imparts a sense of grandiosity and symmetry to the castle. The interiors, adorned with lavish decorations and ornate detailing, further exemplify Hawksmoor's commitment to creating spaces that transcended mere functionality, evoking a sense of splendour and refined taste.

But it was Blenheim Palace that marked the crowning achievement of both men. The Duke of Marlborough commissioned the extravagant house after learning of their work at Castle Howard. The Duke was a war hero, gifted the land by the nation after he defeated the French forces of Louis XIV at the Battle of Blenheim in 1704. Blenheim remains one of England's largest country houses and it the only non-Royal and non-church property



to bear the title of 'palace'. When Vanbrugh fell out with the Duchess of Marlborough, to the extent that he was eventually banned from the project, Hawksmoor remained to see the project through to completion.

Blenheim remains the ancestral home of the Dukes of Marlborough and is today open to the public – one of the most visited grand houses in the country and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

LEGACY AND INFLUENCE

Nicholas Hawksmoor died from 'gout of the stomach' at his home in London

on 25th March 1736. Aged 75, he had spent his last 20 years in poor health, frequently confined to bed.

His legacy extends far beyond the physical structures he created. His impact on the architectural landscape of England, particularly in the development of the Baroque style. His innovative approach and technical rigour, especially in his idiosyncratic London churches, has been a lasting influence on generations of architects and his partnerships with the likes of Vanbrugh and Wren places him among some of the most celebrated names in architectural history.

Quiz Answers: 1. Dudley Castle; 2. Corfe Castle; 3. Arundel Castle; 4. Tattershall Castle 5. Windsor Castle; 6. Belvoir Castle 7. Edlingham Castle; 8. Hever Castle; 9. Leeds Castle; 10. Lincoln Castle; 11. Nottingham Castle; 12. Bodiam Castle; 13. Carisbrooke Castle; 14. Bramber Castle



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