

British Castles

August 2026



Castles Shaped By Women
Oxford, Brougham, Bamburgh & More



EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

Welcome to the August 2026 issue of British Castles Magazine.

Many of Britain's remarkable buildings owe their history to extraordinary women. Some defended castles under siege, others inherited vast estates, and a few ensured that medieval fortresses survived long after their military purpose had passed.

In this issue, we celebrate the women whose lives became intertwined with Britain's castles, from Empress Matilda's dramatic escape from Oxford Castle to Margaret of Anjou's role in the Wars of the Roses. We feature some of them in our first feature.

Our second article explores in more detail one of them: Lady Anne Clifford, whose decades-long fight to reclaim her inheritance culminated in the restoration of several northern castles, including Brougham. We then take a closer look at Brougham Castle itself and discover why it remains her greatest legacy.

To round this issue off our gallery features many of the places mentioned elsewhere in the edition, and our quiz theme is the lives of those women we mention.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Chris, Editor



THE WOMEN WHO SHAPED BRITAIN'S CASTLES

EMPRESSES, QUEENS & MORE

For much of Britain's medieval history, castles are associated with kings, warriors and sieges. Yet many of the country's most remarkable castles also owe their stories to extraordinary women. Some defended strongholds under attack, others inherited vast estates, while others restored castles that might otherwise have disappeared altogether.

Their influence was often exercised in difficult circumstances, whether during civil war, dynastic conflict or lengthy legal disputes. In doing so, they helped shape not only the fortunes of their families but also the history of the castles themselves. Here are six women whose lives became inseparable from some of Britain's most fascinating castles.



Empress Matilda

EMPERESS MATILDA (OXFORD CASTLE)

Empress Matilda's claim to the English throne sparked one of the most turbulent periods in medieval history. Daughter of Henry I, she was named his heir, but following his death in 1135 her cousin Stephen seized the crown, plunging England into a civil war remembered as The Anarchy.

One of the conflict's most dramatic episodes took place at Oxford Castle in the winter of 1142. Trapped inside by King Stephen's forces, Matilda realised the castle could not hold indefinitely.

According to contemporary accounts, she dressed in white to blend into the snow before slipping out under cover of darkness. She crossed the frozen River Thames and escaped to Abingdon before making her way to Wallingford, denying Stephen one of his greatest prizes.

Although Matilda never became queen in her own right, her perseverance ensured that her son eventually inherited the throne as Henry II, founder of the Plantagenet dynasty. Oxford Castle remains forever linked with one of medieval England's most daring escapes.

LADY ANNE CLIFFORD (BROUGHAM CASTLE)

Lady Anne Clifford spent almost forty years fighting for the inheritance she believed was rightfully hers. Born in 1590 into one of northern England's most powerful families, she expected to inherit her father's extensive estates, including several important castles. Instead, they passed to a male relative under pressure from both family tradition and King James I.

Anne refused to surrender her claim. For decades she pursued her inheritance through determined legal and political resistance, recording her struggles in detailed diaries that remain invaluable historical sources. When she finally inherited the estates in 1643, she was already in her fifties, but immediately set about restoring the neglected castles.

Brougham Castle became the centrepiece of this remarkable programme. Anne repaired its buildings, made it habitable once again and used it as both a residence and a symbol of the family's long history. Today, visitors still see Brougham much as Lady Anne left it, making the castle one of the finest memorials to one of Britain's most determined noblewomen.

MARGARET OF ANJOU (BAMBURGH CASTLE)

Few women played a more active role in medieval warfare than Margaret of Anjou. Married to the mentally fragile Henry VI, she became the driving force behind the Lancastrian cause during the Wars of the Roses.

Bamburgh Castle, standing dramatically above the Northumberland coast, became one of the principal Lancastrian strongholds in northern England. Margaret repeatedly travelled between England, Scotland and France seeking military support for her husband's cause, and Bamburgh formed an important base during these campaigns.

In 1464 the castle became the first in England to be defeated by artillery after a sustained bombardment by Yorkist forces. Its capture marked a significant turning point in the conflict and demonstrated how gunpowder was beginning to transform castle warfare. Margaret's determined leadership ensured that Bamburgh occupies a prominent place in both military and political history.

ELIZABETH DE BURGH (CLARE CASTLE)

Elizabeth de Burgh inherited immense wealth at just four years of age following the death of her father, Gilbert de Clare, at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. As one of England's richest heiresses, she became Lady of Clare Castle in Suffolk and managed extensive estates throughout her life.

Unlike many medieval noblewomen remembered for conflict, Elizabeth is celebrated for her careful administration and generosity. She maintained her estates efficiently while also becoming an important patron of education and religion.

Her greatest legacy survives at the University of Cambridge, where she endowed what became Clare College in 1338, making it the university's second-oldest college. Although Clare Castle itself later fell into ruin, Elizabeth's influence has endured for nearly seven centuries through the institution she helped establish, as well as through the careful stewardship of one of England's great medieval lordships.



Clare Castle



Dunbar Castle

JOAN BEAUFORT (DUNBAR CASTLE)

Joan Beaufort, queen of James I of Scotland, demonstrated remarkable resilience following her husband's assassination in 1437. While James was murdered at Perth, Joan managed to protect their young son, the future James II, despite suffering injuries herself during the attack.

During the uncertain years that followed, Dunbar Castle became one of the safest and most strategically important fortresses in Scotland. Joan played a significant role in securing support for her son's minority government and ensuring the continuation of the Stewart dynasty.

Perched high above the North Sea on formidable cliffs, Dunbar had long been regarded as one of Scotland's strongest castles. Joan's determination during a time of political crisis reinforced its reputation as a place of refuge and authority. Although little of the medieval castle survives today, its association with one of Scotland's most capable medieval queens remains an important part of its history.

ISABELLA MACDUFF (KILDRUMMY CASTLE)

Isabella MacDuff, Countess of Buchan, occupies a unique place in Scottish history. In 1306 she defied powerful political interests by helping crown Robert the Bruce as King of Scots at Scone, lending the ceremony additional legitimacy through her family's traditional role in royal inaugurations.

The decision came at enormous personal cost. Captured by English forces shortly afterwards, Isabella was imprisoned on the orders of Edward I in one of the harshest punishments imposed on any noblewoman of the period.



Her story is closely associated with Kildrummy Castle in Aberdeenshire, one of the great strongholds of the Bruce cause. Although the castle later fell after a determined English siege, it remained an important symbol of Scottish resistance during the Wars of Independence.

Isabella's courage ensured that Kildrummy became linked not only with military history but also with personal sacrifice in the struggle for Scotland's independence.

A LASTING LEGACY

The stories of these women remind us that Britain's castles were never simply military fortresses. They were homes, centres of government, symbols of authority and, at times, places of refuge. While kings and soldiers often dominate the history books, women also shaped the destiny of these remarkable buildings through courage, determination, diplomacy and perseverance.

Whether escaping from a besieged castle, defending a family's inheritance or preserving a historic fortress for future generations, these women left legacies that are still written into the stone walls of Britain's castles today.



QUIZ: THE WOMEN OF BRITAIN'S CASTLES

Test your knowledge of the lives of the women linked to British Castles. Answers on page 20.

1. Which woman escaped from Oxford Castle in 1142 by crossing the frozen River Thames?
2. Lady Anne Clifford spent almost forty years fighting to inherit the estates of which noble family?
3. Which English king repeatedly tried to persuade Lady Anne Clifford to give up her inheritance claim?
4. Which medieval queen became the driving force behind the Lancastrian cause during the Wars of the Roses?
5. Elizabeth de Burgh founded which Cambridge college in 1338?
6. Which Scottish noblewoman helped crown Robert the Bruce at Scone in 1306?
7. Joan Beaufort was the wife of which Scottish king?
8. Which queen gave birth to the future Edward II at Caernarfon Castle in 1284?
9. Which queen successfully defended Dover Castle against Prince Louis of France during the First Barons' War?
10. Which wife of Henry VIII was imprisoned at Sudeley Castle before becoming queen?
11. Which future queen spent part of her childhood at Ludlow Castle after her marriage to Prince Arthur?
12. Which medieval queen founded Queens' College, Cambridge, after originally helping to establish its predecessor?
13. Which English queen is associated with Nottingham Castle after pleading for the life of Roger Mortimer?
14. Which woman became one of the richest heiresses in England following the death of her father, Gilbert de Clare, at the Battle of Bannockburn?
15. Which woman commissioned the Countess Pillar near Brougham in memory of her mother?
16. Which queen was imprisoned in castles including Loch Leven, Sheffield and Fotheringhay before her execution?
17. Which wife of Edward I was commemorated by a series of memorial crosses after her death in 1290?
18. Which noblewoman was imprisoned in an iron cage on the orders of Edward I after supporting Robert the Bruce?
19. Which queen became Lady of the English castles in Aquitaine through her marriage to Henry II?
20. Which queen's marriage to Henry VI made her one of the central figures in the Wars of the Roses?

GALLERY: CASTLES SHAPED BY WOMEN



Oxford Castle



Pendragon Castle



Appleby Castle



Skipton Castle



Kildrummy Castle



Appleby Castle



Pendragon Castle



Inside Appleby Castle

A portrait of Lady Anne Clifford, a woman with dark hair, wearing a gold lace headpiece and a green and gold patterned garment. The background is dark.

LADY ANNE CLIFFORD

ENGLAND'S NORTHERN CASTLE RESTORER

Few women in British history showed the determination and resilience of Lady Anne Clifford. At a time when inheritance almost always favoured men, she spent more than forty years fighting for what she believed was her rightful legacy.

When she finally succeeded, she transformed a series of neglected northern castles into symbols of family pride and historical preservation. Today she is remembered not only as one of England's most remarkable noblewomen but also as the woman who saved some of its finest medieval castles.

A NOBLE BEGINNING

Born at Skipton Castle on 30 January 1590, Anne was the only surviving child of George Clifford, 3rd Earl of Cumberland, and Margaret Russell. As a young girl she enjoyed an education that was unusual for women of her time, studying languages, history and religion alongside the accomplishments expected of a noblewoman. Her father, however, spent much of his life at the court of Queen Elizabeth I and was often absent from the family's northern estates.

The Clifford family had held extensive lands across northern England for centuries. Their possessions included the castles of Brougham, Brough, Pendragon, Appleby and Skipton, all of which guarded important routes through Cumbria and Yorkshire. Anne grew up believing these ancient estates would one day become hers.

THE INHERITANCE DISPUTE

Everything changed when her father died in 1605. Rather than allowing Anne to inherit the Clifford estates, his will passed most of the property to his younger brother, Francis Clifford. The decision reflected the widespread belief that great estates should remain in male hands, even though Anne believed she was the rightful heir under earlier family settlements.



Many expected the young Anne to accept the arrangement. Instead, she refused.

Her determination became one of the defining legal battles of seventeenth-century England. Despite pressure from relatives and repeated attempts by King James I to negotiate a compromise, Anne steadfastly refused to surrender her claim.

She famously declared that she would never part with her inheritance, regardless of the personal cost.

The dispute dominated much of her adult life.

Skipton Castle

MARRIAGE AND INDEPENDENCE

During these years Anne married twice. Her first husband was Richard Sackville, 3rd Earl of Dorset, one of the wealthiest noblemen in England. Although the marriage produced children, it was often unhappy, not least because Richard urged Anne to abandon her inheritance claim in return for financial compensation. She refused.

Following Richard's death in 1624, Anne later married Philip Herbert, 4th Earl of Pembroke. This marriage also proved difficult, with Anne maintaining her fiercely independent character throughout. Neither husband succeeded in persuading her to relinquish what she regarded as her birthright. Her persistence was eventually rewarded.

RESTORING THE CLIFFORD CASTLES

In 1643, following the deaths of Francis Clifford and his son Henry without surviving male heirs, Anne finally inherited the vast Clifford estates at the age of fifty-three. After waiting nearly four decades, she immediately began restoring lands and buildings that had suffered years of neglect during the legal dispute and the turmoil of the Civil War.

Her greatest passion was the castles. Anne believed they represented far more than military fortresses. They were symbols of her family's history and identity, linking her directly with generations of Clifford ancestors. She devoted enormous energy and considerable personal wealth to repairing them.

Brougham Castle became the centre of her restoration programme. Standing beside the River Eamont near Penrith, the castle had fallen into serious disrepair after centuries of conflict and changing fortunes.

She also restored nearby Brough Castle, rebuilt much of the ruined keep at Pendragon Castle and carried out substantial work at Appleby Castle. Skipton Castle, badly damaged during the Civil War after a lengthy siege, also benefited from her attention.

Together, these projects represented one of the most ambitious programmes of castle restoration undertaken by any private individual in seventeenth-century Britain.



Pendragon Castle

A PIONEER OF HERITAGE CONSERVATION

Anne approached the work with remarkable care. Rather than replacing medieval buildings with fashionable new houses, as many of her contemporaries did, she sought to preserve the castles' historic character while making them practical homes once again. In many respects, her philosophy anticipated modern ideas of heritage conservation by more than two centuries.

Her achievements were not limited to architecture. Lady Anne was one of the great diarists of her age. Throughout her life she kept detailed journals, account books and family records that provide historians with invaluable insights into aristocratic life during the late Tudor and Stuart periods.

She carefully documented her travels, building projects, legal disputes and daily activities, creating one of the richest personal archives left by any seventeenth-century English noblewoman.

She also commissioned monuments celebrating her family's history and her own achievements. The most famous is the Countess Pillar near Brougham, erected in memory of her mother at the place where they had said farewell for the last time. It remains one of Cumbria's most distinctive historical landmarks.



[From the Portrait at Knole by Mytens]

Lady Anne Clifford, wife of Richard Sackville, 3rd Earl of Dorset

The DIARY *of the Lady* ANNE CLIFFORD WITH AN *INTRODUCTORY NOTE* By V. SACKVILLE-WEST



LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD.

A LASTING LEGACY

In later life Anne spent much of her time travelling between her restored northern estates, supervising repairs, administering her lands and dispensing charity to local communities. Her reputation for fairness and generosity earned widespread respect among her tenants, while her independence continued to impress those who met her.

Lady Anne Clifford died at Brougham Castle on 22 March 1676 at the age of eighty-six. By then she had achieved almost everything she had fought for throughout her remarkable life. The Clifford estates had been restored, the castles preserved and her family's legacy secured for future generations.

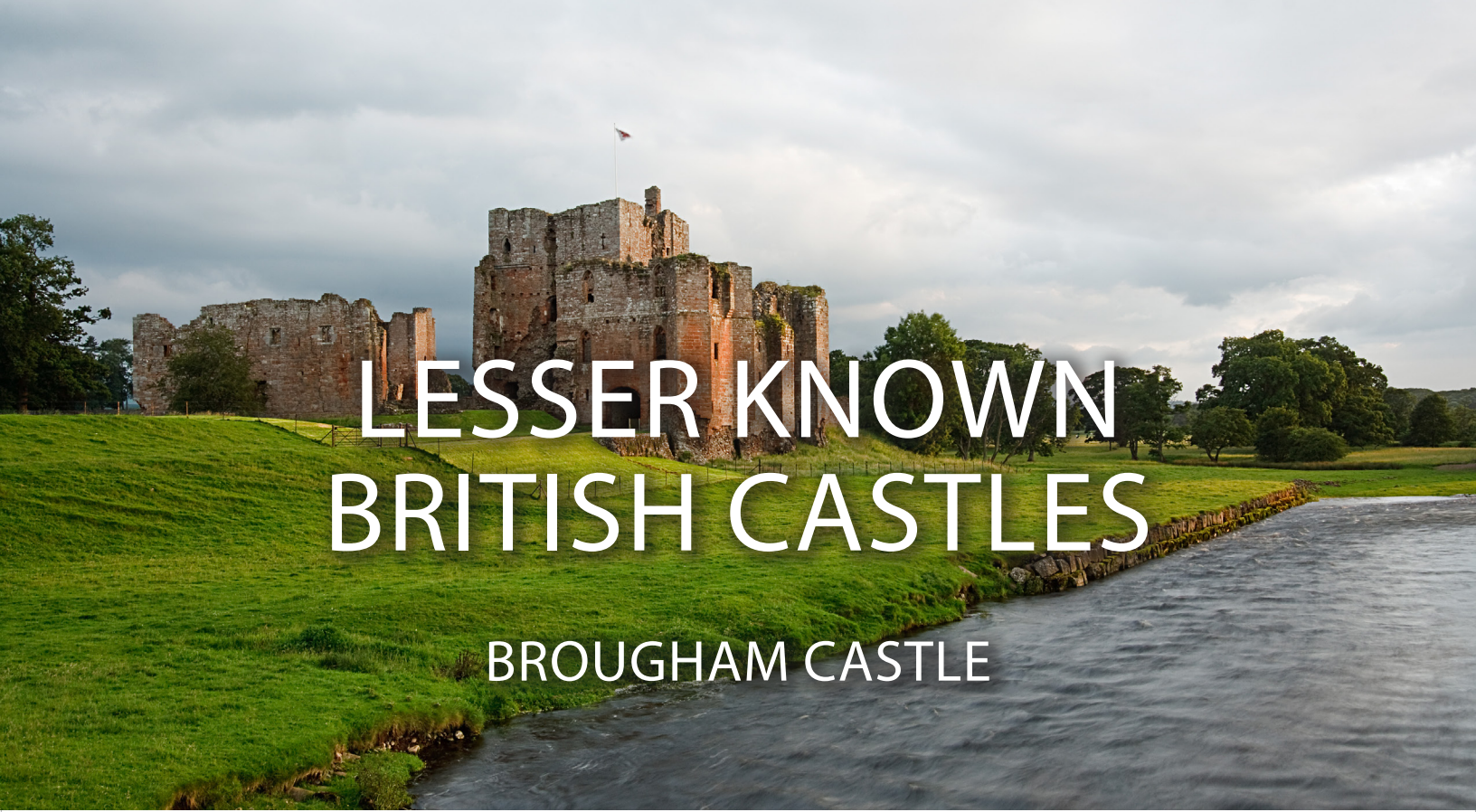


Appleby Castle

Today, visitors to Brougham, Appleby, Brough and Skipton can still see the results of her vision. Many of the buildings that survive owe their existence to the work she commissioned during the seventeenth century. Without her determination, several of these castles might have deteriorated beyond repair or disappeared altogether.

Lady Anne Clifford's story is remarkable because it combines personal resilience with an enduring contribution to Britain's architectural heritage. She defied convention, challenged powerful men and devoted decades to preserving some of England's most important medieval castles. In doing so, she ensured that her legacy would be remembered not only in history books but also in the stone walls that still stand across northern England today.

Quiz Answers: 1. Empress Matilda; 2. The Clifford family; 3. James I; 4. Margaret of Anjou; 5. Clare College; 6. Isabella MacDuff; 7. James I of Scotland; 8. Eleanor of Castile; 9. Eleanor of Brittany; 10. Katherine Parr; 11. Catherine of Aragon; 12. Margaret of Anjou; 13. Queen Philippa; 14. Elizabeth de Burgh; 15. Lady Anne Clifford; 16. Mary, Queen of Scots; 17. Eleanor of Castile; 18. Isabella MacDuff; 19. Eleanor of Aquitaine; 20. Margaret of Anjou



LESSER KNOWN BRITISH CASTLES

BROUGHAM CASTLE

Standing beside the River Eamont, just south-east of Penrith in Cumbria, Brougham Castle is one of northern England's finest medieval fortresses. Although now a picturesque ruin, its weathered stone walls tell a story that spans more than eight centuries. Kings, nobles and soldiers all left their mark here, but no individual is more closely associated with the castle than Lady Anne Clifford, whose determined restoration ensured its survival for future generations.

Today, Brougham Castle is managed by English Heritage and remains one of Cumbria's most rewarding historic sites. Its peaceful riverside setting masks a long and often turbulent history.

A NORMAN FORTRESS

The castle was built in the early thirteenth century by Robert de Vieuxpont, one of King John's most trusted supporters. Its position was carefully chosen beside the old Roman road linking Carlisle and York, close to the site of the Roman fort of Brocavum. Whoever controlled Brougham controlled an important route across northern England.

The first castle was constructed largely from sandstone and incorporated a massive stone keep, an increasingly popular feature in place of earlier timber defences. Thick curtain walls, towers and a gatehouse gradually transformed the site into a formidable fortress capable of defending both the surrounding estates and the strategic road.

During the troubled years following King John's death, Brougham changed hands several times as rival barons fought for power. Despite the instability, the castle steadily grew in importance and eventually passed into the hands of the Clifford family, with whom it would remain closely associated for centuries.

THE CLIFFORD STRONGHOLD

The Cliffords became one of the most powerful noble families in northern England. Brougham served not only as a defensive fortress but also as an administrative centre from which they managed extensive estates stretching across Cumbria and Yorkshire.

The family's fortunes often reflected the turbulent politics of medieval England. Members of the Clifford family fought in conflicts against the Scots and later became deeply involved in the Wars of the Roses.

The castle was strengthened and improved over successive generations, with comfortable domestic apartments added alongside its military defences.

Although Brougham never experienced the famous sieges of castles such as Kenilworth or Harlech, its location close to the Scottish border meant that it remained strategically important.



YEARS OF DECLINE

By the late sixteenth century the castle's military role had diminished. Improvements in artillery made many medieval fortifications obsolete, while wealthy noble families increasingly preferred comfortable country houses to draughty stone castles. After the death of George Clifford, 3rd Earl of Cumberland, in 1605, the estate became the subject of a bitter inheritance dispute. For almost forty years uncertainty over ownership meant that maintenance was neglected. Roofs deteriorated, buildings fell into disrepair and parts of the castle became uninhabitable.

Many castles across England suffered similar fates during this period, with some abandoned altogether or quarried for building stone. Brougham seemed destined to follow the same path.

LADY ANNE'S RESTORATION

Everything changed in 1643 when Lady Anne Clifford finally inherited the Clifford estates after decades of legal battles.

Rather than abandoning the ageing fortress, Anne saw Brougham as a symbol of her family's history and of the inheritance she had spent most of her life fighting to secure. She immediately began an ambitious programme of restoration.

Damaged roofs were repaired, domestic buildings rebuilt and the great hall returned to use. Living accommodation was modernised while preserving the castle's medieval character. Unlike many seventeenth-century landowners, Anne resisted replacing the old castle with an entirely new mansion.

Brougham became one of her favourite residences. She spent long periods there overseeing repairs, administering her estates and entertaining visitors. Her detailed diaries reveal both her affection for the castle and her satisfaction in seeing it restored after so many years of neglect.

Thanks to her efforts, Brougham enjoyed a new lease of life at a time when many medieval castles were being abandoned.

LIFE AFTER LADY ANNE

Lady Anne Clifford died at Brougham Castle in 1676 at the age of eighty-six. Without her personal commitment, the castle's revival proved difficult to sustain.

Later generations of the Clifford family rarely lived there, and once again the buildings gradually deteriorated. Roofs collapsed, timber was removed and the castle slowly became the romantic ruin that visitors recognise today.

Ironically, its decline helped preserve much of its medieval appearance. Because it was never substantially rebuilt in later architectural styles, Brougham retained the essential character of a medieval fortress shaped by centuries of gradual development.

Other castles which escaped this fate may be prettier - but constant habitation and tinkering by owners have made many of them very different from their medieval roots. Not so Brougham.



Ruined Brougham Guardhouse



Inside Ruined Brougham Keep

BROUGHAM TODAY

Modern visitors can still appreciate many of the features that Lady Anne worked so hard to preserve. The imposing keep dominates the skyline, while substantial stretches of curtain wall, towers, gatehouse and great hall remain standing.

Interpretation throughout the site explains both its medieval origins and Lady Anne Clifford's remarkable restoration. The peaceful setting beside the River Eamont offers a striking contrast to the political disputes and border conflicts that once defined the castle's history.

Unlike some of England's larger castles, Brougham retains a quiet atmosphere that encourages visitors to explore at their own pace. Its surviving ruins clearly reveal how the various buildings fitted together and how the castle evolved over four centuries.

A CASTLE DEFINED BY ONE WOMAN

Many castles are remembered for great battles or famous kings. Brougham Castle is different. Although its medieval origins are important, much of its modern significance rests on the extraordinary determination of Lady Anne Clifford.

Without her, the castle might easily have disappeared into complete ruin during the seventeenth century. Instead, she restored it with care, respected its history and ensured that it remained an enduring symbol of the Clifford family.

Today, Brougham Castle stands not simply as a medieval fortress, but as a monument to one woman's perseverance. Every surviving wall and tower reflects both its medieval builders and the noblewoman who refused to let their legacy be lost.



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