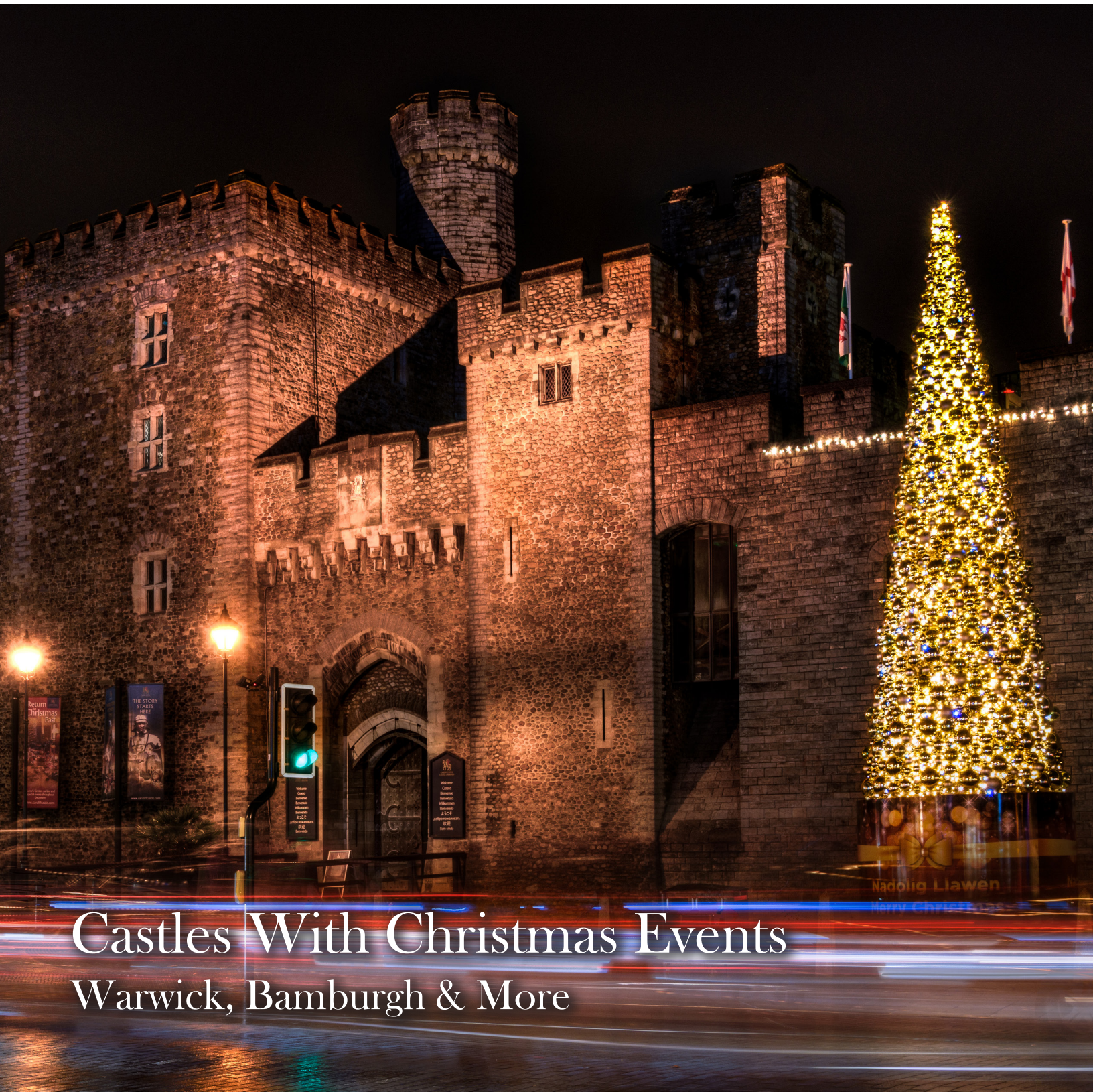


British Castles

December 2025



Castles With Christmas Events
Warwick, Bamburgh & More



EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

A warm welcome to this the December 2025 issue of the British Castles Magazine, which features castles who really get into the festive spirit.

Our first article profiles some of the best activities put on by castles over the Christmas break.

Our second feature is York Castle, often overlooked as an attraction due to the many other magnificent things to see - the Minster, the Shambles etc - in the wonderful city of York.

It also has a wonderful Christmas display at its replica Victorian street in the attached museum, hence its inclusion here.

Our lesser known British Castle is another castle that really makes an effort during the festive season, Powderham Castle in Devon.

Our gallery is, as you'd expect, of castles at Christmas time. Our picture quiz asks you to identify many of the castle featured elsewhere on the issue.

Anyway I hope you enjoy the issue

Chris



Here are some of the Christmas events to be held this year in some of Britain's finest castles. Christmas is a special time and its castles often get in the Christmas spirit too.

WINDSOR CASTLE (BERKSHIRE, ENGLAND)

Windsor Castle is one of the UK's foremost castles, still used by the Royal family (indeed it was, with her summer retreat in Balmoral, the late Queen's favourite home), and for Christmas 2025 it is offering "Christmas at Windsor Castle" with a host of seasonal features.

Visitors can explore how the Victorian era celebrated Christmas, take part in craft-workshops in the Learning Centre, and enjoy festive family activities throughout the holiday period. (Royal Collection Trust)

The grand setting of the Castle adds to the festive atmosphere: the historic State Apartments decorated for the season, the long tradition of royal Christmases here, and the fact that the venue regularly hosts large crowds and special seasonal programs.

Tip: booking ahead is essential because entries and activity slots fill up during the festive season.

HEVER CASTLE (KENT, ENGLAND)

At Hever Castle for Christmas 2025, visitors will find both “Daytime Christmas” experiences and “Twilight Christmas” events. (Hever Castle)

Daytime features include a castle-grounds trail, characters and Father Christmas visits, fairground rides, play areas and the maze.

At twilight, the castle grounds are illuminated, and the feel becomes quite magical.

Hever Castle, famously the childhood home of Anne Boleyn, offers historic rooms and grounds which take on a particularly festive atmosphere when decorated and lit up for the season.

Tip: For a more atmospheric visit, go in the early evening when the lights are on.



CASTLE HOWARD (NORTH YORKSHIRE, ENGLAND)

Castle Howard’s offering for Christmas 2025 is titled “Christmas at Castle Howard with The Wonderful Wizard of Oz.” (castlehoward.co.uk)

The house is transformed into immersive theatrical displays and installations inspired by The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, interwoven with the historic interior. Alongside this are the gardens and boathouse grottoes, Santa features, wreath workshops, and other family-friendly programmes.

Castle Howard is an impressive stately home rather than a purely medieval fortress — its grandeur and large estate make it ideal for a festive day out.

Tip: Secure time-slot tickets for the house event, arrive early and allow time for the gardens too.

WARWICK CASTLE (WARWICKSHIRE, ENGLAND)

At Warwick Castle visitors in 2025 can enjoy the “Christmas at the Castle” events: for example, ice-skating in the castle grounds, a light-trail, and special carol performances. (Warwick Castle)

The medieval castle with its ramparts, towers and grounds becomes a festive playground in winter; for example the light-trail winds through the grounds, and the ice-rink is nestled within the historic setting.

Tip: Dress warmly, especially for outdoor parts; the experience combines historic architecture and seasonal fun.

LEEDS CASTLE (KENT, ENGLAND)

Leeds Castle offers “Neverland Christmas” from 22 November 2025 to 4 January 2026 — a Peter Pan-inspired festive adventure full of wonder and seasonal atmosphere. Here you’ll find themed trail elements, illuminated gardens, festive displays across the castle and grounds. The history of Leeds Castle (sometimes called “the loveliest castle in the world”) combined with the seasonal overlay makes this a strong choice for families.

Tip: Visit on weekdays if you prefer quieter experiences; evenings with lights tend to be busier.



BAMBURGH CASTLE (NORTHUMBERLAND, ENGLAND)

Bamburgh Castle’s “Christmas 2025: Treasured Tales” event includes festive activities such as wreath-making and “Twilight Christmas Nights” for after-dark sparkle.

Set on the Northumberland coast, Bamburgh Castle’s dramatic location adds special ambience for a crisp winter visit with seasonal touches and coastal views.

Tip: Because of its remote location relative to big cities, planning travel and parking in advance is wise.

Bamburgh Castle



Christmas At Powderham Castle

POWDERHAM CASTLE (DEVON, ENGLAND)

Powderham Castle offers “Christmas at the Castle 2025” with the grounds and castle transformed for the season — twinkling lights, festive displays and the sound of Christmas music throughout.

This is a somewhat smaller-scale destination, but one where the festive décor and environment feel intimate and atmospheric.

Tip: Combine a visit with the grounds and estate walk for best value.

BELVOIR CASTLE (LEICESTERSHIRE, ENGLAND)

Belvoir Castle’s Christmas offering includes guided tours, seasonal events such as Santa’s grotto, and gardens decorated for the season.

The castle sits high above the Vale of Belvoir and offers impressive views; the combination of historic interior and festive décor make it worthwhile.

Tip: If you’re spending a few days in the region, consider pairing a castle visit with a local village and countryside drive.

QUIZ: CASTLES AT CHRISTMAS

See if you can match the castles mentioned elsewhere in this issue with its photo. Each castle is featured at least once, sometimes twice. Answers on page 24.

Windsor Castle

Leeds Castle

Castle Howard

Eilean Donan Castle

Kilchurn Castle

Belvoir Castle

York Castle

Powderham Castle

Warwick Castle

Bamburgh Castle

Hever Castle

Edinburgh Castle

Rochester Castle

Braemar Castle







Edinburgh Castle

GALLERY: CASTLES AT CHRISTMAS TIME



Kilchurn Castle, Scotland



Hever Castle



Windsor Castle

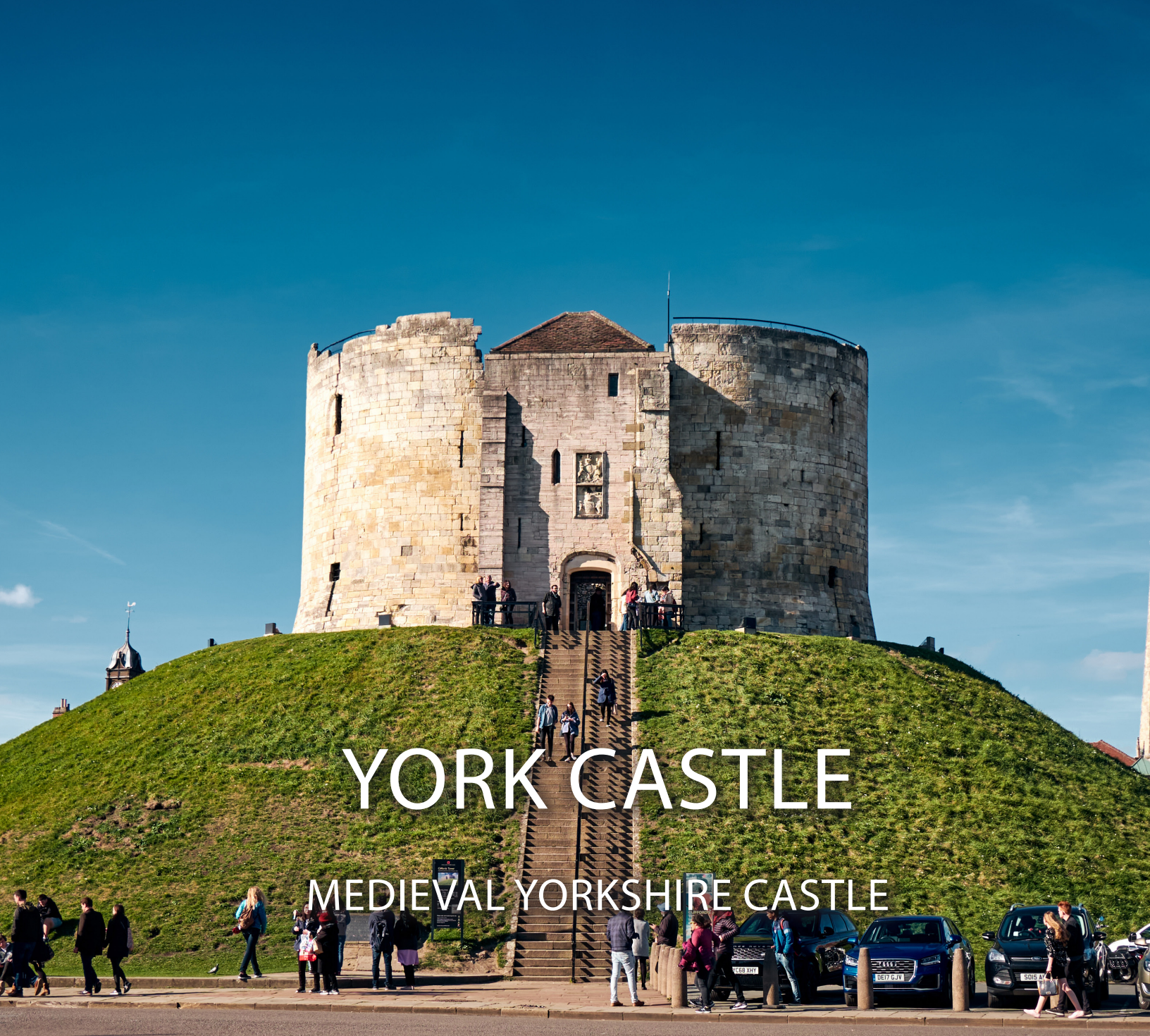


Rochester Castle



Braemar Castle





YORK CASTLE

MEDIEVAL YORKSHIRE CASTLE

York's one of the most popular place to visit - especially at Christmas when its ancient steets are lit of with the city's Christmas lights. Its often overlooked castle, however, also gets into the festive spirit - it's home to the York Castle museum with its replica Victorian Kirkgate Street decorated like a Dickensian Christmas.

The castle, situated in the heart of the city has a history spanning nearly a thousand years, reflecting many of the political, military, and social changes that shaped the country. Although only Clifford's Tower remains standing in its medieval form today, the wider castle complex has undergone numerous transformations, serving as a fortress, royal residence, prison, administrative centre, and now a cultural landmark.

ORIGINS AND NORMAN CONSTRUCTION

The origins of York Castle date to 1068, shortly after the Norman Conquest. William the Conqueror sought to secure control over the north of England, which had proven resistant to Norman rule.

York's strategic position at the confluence of the River Ouse and the River Foss made it a natural location for a major defensive stronghold.

William ordered the construction of a motte-and-bailey castle, one of several he built across the region.

The original castle consisted of a large mound (motte) topped by a timber keep, with an associated enclosed courtyard (bailey) protected by earthworks and palisades. It complemented the existing Roman walls which surround the city.

This early structure served both military and administrative functions, acting as a base from which Norman forces could project authority into the wider north.

The early years of the castle were turbulent, with several uprisings and counterattacks taking place in the late 11th century, making it a focal point in the consolidation of Norman rule.



York City Walls

MEDIEVAL DEVELOPMENT AND CLIFFORD'S TOWER

Throughout the 12th and 13th centuries, York Castle was rebuilt and expanded. The wooden keep was replaced with stone, and the castle became increasingly important during the reigns of the Angevin kings, particularly Henry II and Henry III. Much of what survives today - especially the iconic Clifford's Tower - dates from this period of rebuilding.

Clifford's Tower, with its distinctive quatrefoil plan, was constructed in the mid-13th century. Its exact purpose is a topic of ongoing study, but it functioned as a central strongpoint, royal symbol, and defensive redoubt.

Over the centuries, the tower became a potent symbol in local history, associated with both royal authority and significant events, including a tragic incident in 1190 in which York's Jewish community took refuge in the earlier timber keep; which was set on fire. This episode left a lasting cultural and historical imprint on the site.

The tower was named "Clifford's Tower" in the 14th century after Roger de Clifford, a noble executed for treason whose body was reputedly displayed there. By this time, York Castle had developed into a substantial complex, including royal apartments, a chapel, administrative buildings, and extensive defensive walls.



Henry II



York Castle At Night

CENTRE OF ADMINISTRATION AND JUSTICE

As the medieval period progressed, York Castle increasingly became an administrative rather than defensive site. By the later Middle Ages, it housed courts, treasury functions, and government offices.

Its location at the centre of one of England's most important cities made it a natural venue for regional governance.

During the Tudor and Stuart eras, the castle continued to serve as a hub for local justice. New buildings were added to accommodate courts and prisons, reflecting the evolving nature of law enforcement and administration.

Although parts of the castle walls and buildings deteriorated, the site remained active and functional, adapting to practical needs over military ones.

PRISON AND THE 18TH–19TH CENTURY TRANSFORMATION

Perhaps one of the most significant developments in the castle's later history was the construction of the **York Castle Prison**, which operated from the 18th century into the 20th.

The prison complex replaced earlier structures and became an important institution in the region. It housed both debtors and criminals, and conditions varied across different periods; reforms in the 18th and 19th centuries influenced its management and design.

Architecturally, this phase transformed much of the castle precinct. New prison buildings, a courthouse, and other administrative structures were erected, many in neoclassical style.

Although much of the prison site has since been demolished or repurposed, its historical significance is widely recognised, and some features are incorporated into the modern York Castle Museum.

MODERN ERA: PRESERVATION, MUSEUM DEVELOPMENT, AND PUBLIC USE

Today, York Castle is a mixture of preserved historical structures and modern cultural spaces. Clifford's Tower, managed by English Heritage, remains the most visible medieval component.

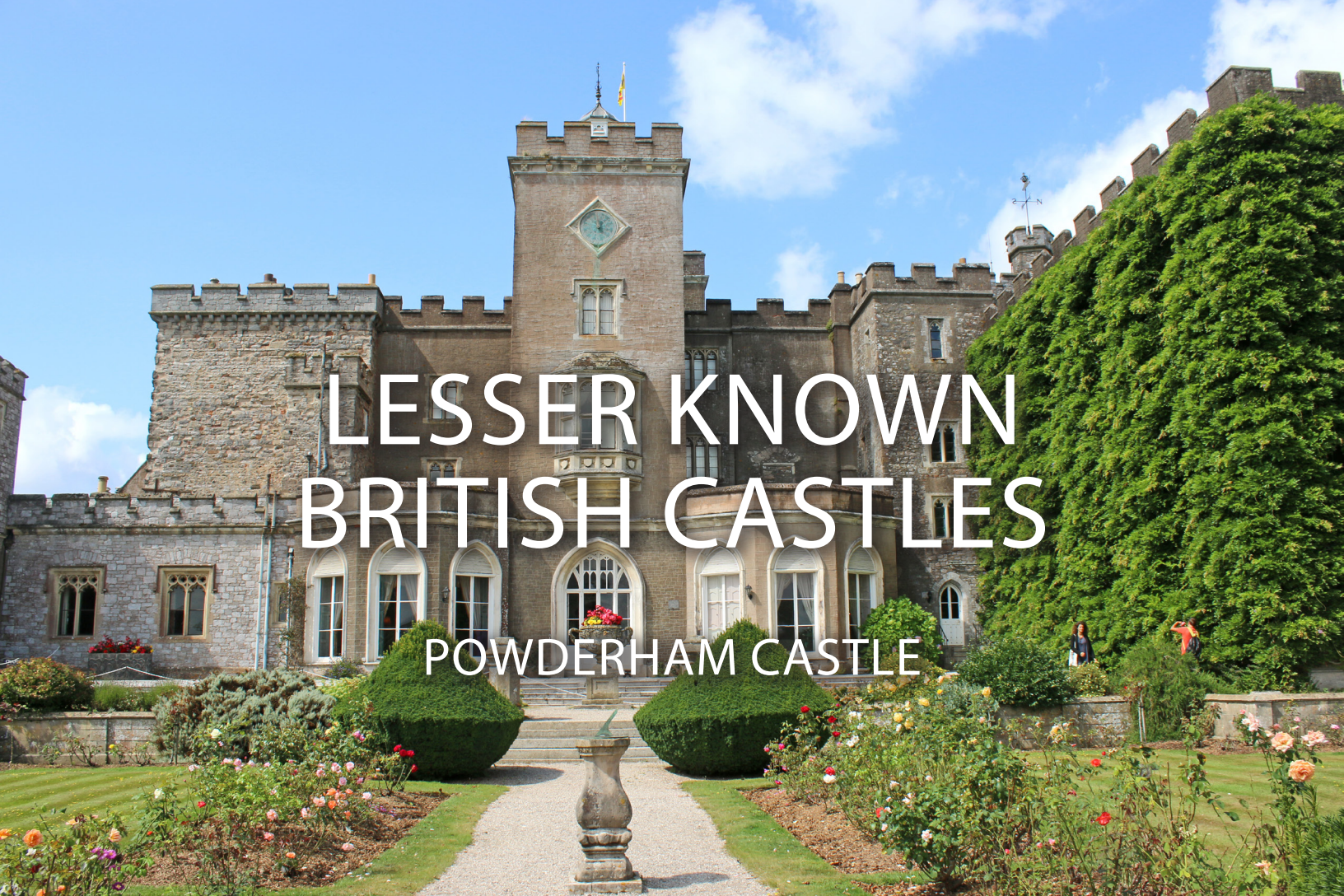
Visitors can climb the tower for panoramic views of York and learn about the site's long and varied history through exhibitions and interpretive panels.

Adjacent to the tower is the **York Castle Museum**, housed in former prison buildings. The museum is known for its immersive historical displays, including reconstructed streets, period rooms, and collections documenting daily life through the centuries.



The presence of the museum emphasises the site's transformed role: from fortress and administrative centre to cultural and educational destination.

The castle precinct is also part of broader urban redevelopment discussions, as the surrounding area has archaeological layers, civic buildings, and spaces used for public events. Efforts to interpret and preserve the site reflect both local pride and the need to balance heritage with contemporary use.



Powderham Castle is a little known castle in south western England. Despite this, its Christmas decorations are very popular. Nevertheless it's a worthwhile place to visit throughout the year. Here then is our guide:

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

One of the first things you notice when you arrive is how peaceful the surroundings are. The castle sits beside the Exe Estuary, which gives the whole area a slightly dreamy atmosphere—half countryside estate, half waterside retreat. Even before you step inside, the approach through the deer park sets the tone.

You often see the fallow deer wandering across the fields, and the long driveway feels like it's slowly preparing you to step into something older and grander than the outside world.

Powderham isn't one of those soaring stone fortresses like you'd find in Northumberland; it's more of a fortified manor house that grew into a castle over centuries.

The architecture feels lived-in and welcoming rather than severe, which is probably why spending a few hours here feels more like visiting a historic home than touring a fortress.



Powderham Castle

A LITTLE HISTORY TO SET THE SCENE

Although the experience is very visitor-friendly, the castle does have a deep historical background.

Powderham has been home to the 'Courtenay family', the Earls of Devon, for more than 600 years. It began in the 14th century as a castellated manor house and gradually expanded through the Tudor, Georgian, and Victorian periods.

You can see all those layers inside: medieval hall spaces, elegant 18th-century rooms, and areas restored after damage in the Civil War.

None of the history feels heavy or overwhelming, though. The guides and displays tend to present it as family history rather than political drama, which makes it easier to connect the rooms with the people who lived in them.



Music Room

TOURING THE CASTLE INTERIORS

Once you go inside, you'll probably start with the 'guided tour', and I recommend it because the interior makes more sense when someone explains why certain rooms look the way they do.

The Marble Hall is one of the first grand spaces you see—tall columns, a sweeping staircase, and that polished, classical atmosphere that Georgian architects loved.

Then there are smaller and more intimate rooms, like the Music Room with its ornate decoration and the library that feels like the kind of place you'd want to sit with a book for hours. Some rooms still show the castle's medieval origins, while others lean into the later, more decorative phases of the estate's life.

WALKING THE GROUNDS

After the house, the 'grounds' are where you'll want to linger. The gardens are very easy to wander, and none of the routes are strenuous. If the weather works in your favour, walking down towards the estuary gives you the best views—especially in the late afternoon when the water catches the light. You can also explore woodland paths, the rose garden, and some ornamental structures tucked into the landscape.

One nice thing is that the estate isn't over-manicured. It's tidy and well kept, but it still feels like real countryside rather than an overly arranged show garden. There's also a sense of openness because the estate stretches beyond what you can see, giving you a feeling that the castle is just one part of a much larger story.



Powderham Castle And Grounds



Powderham Farm Shop

FAMILY-FRIENDLY ATTRACTIONS

If you ever go with family - or just enjoy something a bit more lively - there's a good amount to do beyond the house and gardens. Powderham has a farm area, a walled garden playground, and various activities tailored to younger visitors. The deer park safari rides are surprisingly fun, even for adults, partly because you get closer to the deer than you can on foot.

Throughout the year, they sometimes host seasonal activities, food events, craft fairs, and outdoor theatre. These aren't overwhelming or overly commercial, and they tend to complement the setting rather than distract from it.

There's also a great farm shop which has a family friendly cafe.

Quiz Answers: 1. Leeds Castle; 2. Bamburgh Castle; 3. Belvoir Castle; 4. Braemar Castle; 5. Windsor Castle; 6. Castle Howard; 7. Hever Castle; 8. York Castle; 9. Powderham Castle; 10. Warwick Castle; 11. Eilean Donan Castle; 12. Kilchurn Castle; 13. Rochester Castle; 14. Edinburgh Castle



British Castles Magazine

Published by british-castles.com