

British Castles

July 2026



Storied Castles
Castles of Legend & Literature



EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

Welcome to the July 2026 issue of British Castles Magazine.

This month's issue looks at British castles through the lens of legend and literature.

Castles have always featured in stories the British tell about themselves. Our first article looks at some great examples. For example Tintagel is tied to the stories of King Arthur, while Kenilworth entered the romantic historical imagination through Walter Scott.

Corfe Castle is often linked with Enid Blyton's storybook landscapes, Alnwick has gained a modern afterlife through Harry Potter, and Slains Castle is often said to have helped inspire ideas behind Castle Dracula.

Our second feature looks more closely at Corfe Castle, whose history includes royal ownership, civil war, siege, destruction and survival.

Our lesser-known castle this month is Strawberry Hill, Horace Walpole's Gothic Revival house, designed to evoke a medieval fortress. Walpole also wrote *The Castle of Otranto*, often regarded as the first Gothic novel.

Finally, this month's quiz and gallery continue the castles of literature and legend theme.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Chris



CASTLES LINKED TO BRITISH LEGEND & LITERATURE

TINTAGEL, CORFE CASTLE & MORE

Castles have long been part of Britain's historical landscape, but they also occupy an important place in its literary imagination. Some are linked with medieval legends. Others appear in novels, inspired fictional settings, or helped shape the Gothic mood that became so important in British literature.

The connections are not always straightforward. A castle may be a direct setting, a probable influence, or simply part of a wider tradition of storytelling. Together, however, these castles show how stone buildings became places of myth, romance and invention.



Tintagel

TINTAGEL CASTLE, CORNWALL

We start with the old and the most, well, legendary.

Tintagel Castle is one of the most famous literary castles in Britain because of its long association with King Arthur. The ruined medieval castle stands on a dramatic headland on the north Cornwall coast, but its Arthurian reputation is older than the surviving ruins.

In the 12th century, Geoffrey of Monmouth linked Tintagel with the conception of Arthur in his *History of the Kings of Britain*. Later writers, poets and storytellers helped build on that connection.

Historically, Tintagel was also an important early medieval site, but for many readers its real power lies in the way it joins landscape, legend and literature.

KENILWORTH CASTLE, WARWICKSHIRE

Kenilworth Castle has a strong literary link through Sir Walter Scott's 1821 novel *Kenilworth*. The book is set around the court of Elizabeth I and draws on the story of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and Amy Robsart.

Scott's version is romanticised, but it helped fix Kenilworth in the popular imagination as a place of Tudor intrigue, courtly display and private tragedy. The real castle was already one of England's great aristocratic residences, especially after Dudley transformed it for Elizabeth's famous visit in 1575.

Scott added another layer, turning its ruins into a setting for historical romance.

STRAWBERRY HILL, TWICKENHAM

Strawberry Hill is not a medieval fortress, but it belongs in any discussion of castles and literature. Created by Horace Walpole in the 18th century, it was a Gothic Revival house designed to evoke a romantic, medieval atmosphere.

Its towers, battlements, stained glass and theatrical interiors helped shape the taste for Gothic architecture in Britain. Walpole also wrote *The Castle of Otranto*, first published in 1764 and often described as the first Gothic novel. In that sense, Strawberry Hill did not merely borrow from castle imagery. It helped turn the castle into a literary setting of mystery, fear and imagination.

It's the subject of a longer feature later in this issue.

CORFE CASTLE, DORSET

Corfe is another castle featured at greater length later in this edition.

Corfe Castle stands above the village of the same name in Dorset, its broken walls making one of the most recognisable ruins in southern England.

Its literary link is usually made through Enid Blyton, who knew the area and is often said to have drawn inspiration from Corfe for Kirrin Castle in the *Famous Five* books.

The connection is not a simple one-to-one identification, but the resemblance is easy to understand: a ruined castle, a village, a sense of adventure and the nearby Dorset coast.

Corfe also has a dramatic real history, including siege and destruction during the English Civil War.



Corfe Castle

ALNWICK CASTLE, NORTHUMBERLAND

Alnwick Castle's modern literary fame comes largely through film adaptations rather than from a novel set directly within its walls.

It appeared as Hogwarts in the first two Harry Potter films, giving the castle a new place in the imagination of readers and viewers around the world.



Alnwick Castle

The link works because Alnwick already has the qualities associated with a storybook castle: towers, courtyards, battlements and a powerful sense of age. Long before cinema, it was the seat of the Percy family and one of the great castles of northern England. Its recent screen role has added a fresh literary afterlife.

SLAINS CASTLE, ABERDEENSHIRE

Slains Castle, on the Aberdeenshire coast, is often linked with Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Stoker visited nearby Cruden Bay, and local tradition has long suggested that the ruined castle helped inspire aspects of *Castle Dracula*.

The claim may or may not be true, but it is easy to see why the association has endured.

Slains stands in a bleak and dramatic position above the North Sea, with ruined walls, exposed cliffs and an atmosphere well suited to Gothic fiction.

Even without a direct textual match, it belongs naturally to the world of stormy castles and dark imagination.



Slains Castle

CASTLE HOWARD, NORTH YORKSHIRE

Castle Howard is not a castle in the defensive medieval sense, but its name, scale and architecture have given it a strong literary afterlife. It is most closely associated with Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, through the celebrated television and film adaptations that used Castle Howard as the fictional Brideshead.

The house's domes, wings, long façades and grand interiors helped create an image of aristocratic beauty, privilege and decline. Its setting also mattered. The broad approach, formal landscape and sense of inherited grandeur matched the mood of Waugh's novel, which looks back at a vanished world of country houses, old families and social change.

Although Waugh did not write the novel specifically for Castle Howard, the screen versions fixed the connection in the public mind. For many viewers, Castle Howard became Brideshead. It is a good example of how later adaptation can reshape literary geography, turning a real historic house into the visual memory of a fictional place.



Castle Howard



QUIZ: STORIED CASTLES

Test your knowledge of the castles of legend and literature. Answers on page 24

1. In which county is Tintagel, famously associated with the legend of King Arthur?
2. What was the name of the magician in those King Arthur stories?
3. Which 12th-century writer helped connect Tintagel with King Arthur?
4. Sir Walter Scott's novel Kenilworth is associated with Kenilworth Castle, located in which county?
5. Which queen made a famous visit to Kenilworth Castle in 1575?
6. Which Gothic Revival house was created by Horace Walpole at Twickenham?
7. Which 1764 novel by Horace Walpole is often regarded as the first Gothic novel in English?
8. What important job did Horace Walpole's father hold?
9. In which county is Corfe Castle?
10. During which 17th-century conflict was Corfe Castle besieged and later deliberately damaged?
11. Which Royalist woman is closely associated with the defence of Corfe Castle during the English Civil War?
12. Which Northumberland castle was used as a filming location for Hogwarts in the first two Harry Potter films?
13. The castle in question 12 has long been the seat of which powerful northern family?
14. Which ruined Aberdeenshire castle is often said to have helped inspire Bram Stoker's Castle Dracula?
15. Bram Stoker regularly visited which village near the castle in question 14?
16. Who wrote Brideshead Revisited, associated with Castle Howard?
17. Which literary genre, named after a barbarian tribe, is especially associated with old castles?
18. Corfe Castle stands above a village of the same name in what Hills?
19. Corfe Castle is linked with the adventure fiction of which children's author?
20. In which London suburb is Strawberry Hill House?

GALLERY: STORIED CASTLES



Kenilworth Castle



Strawberry Hill House



Temple of the Four Winds, Castle Howard



Strawberry Hill House Fireplace



Alnwick Castle

Pathway to Tintagel





Inside Slains Castle



Kenilworth Castle



CORFE CASTLE

POWER, SIEGE AND RUIN IN DORSET

Corfe Castle is one of the most striking ruins in southern England. Its broken walls rise above the village of Corfe Castle in Dorset, standing on a gap in the Purbeck Hills between Wareham and Swanage. The site has a dramatic natural position, but its importance was never only scenic. For centuries, Corfe was a place of royal power, military control and political conflict.

Its ruins today are the result of one of the most famous castle destructions of the English Civil War. Yet Corfe's story reaches much further back, from Saxon England to the Norman Conquest, medieval kings, royal prisoners, noble families and civil war.

A STRONGHOLD BEFORE THE NORMANS

The name Corfe comes from an Old English word meaning a cutting or gap, referring to the break in the chalk ridge where the castle stands. This made it a useful defensive position long before the stone castle was built.

The site is closely associated with Saxon history, especially the murder of King Edward the Martyr in 978. Edward, a young king of England, was killed at Corfe, traditionally near the residence of his stepmother, Queen Ælfthryth. The exact details remain uncertain, but the event became part of the castle's early historical identity. Edward was later regarded as a martyr, and his death added a darker note to Corfe's reputation.

Before 1066, there was likely a high-status residence or defended site at Corfe. Its commanding position made it valuable in a kingdom where control of roads, coasts and local authority mattered.

THE NORMAN CASTLE

After the Norman Conquest, William the Conqueror and his successors built castles across England to secure control. Corfe became one of the important royal castles of the south-west. Unlike many early Norman castles, which began as timber motte-and-bailey structures, Corfe was built in stone from an early stage. This suggests its particular importance.



The keep, or great tower, was probably begun under Henry I in the early 12th century. Its pale limestone walls would have made a strong visual statement, dominating the surrounding landscape. It was not simply a military structure. It was also a royal residence, a symbol of authority and a secure place for the king's interests in Dorset.

Corfe's location gave it control over the route through the Purbeck Hills and access to the surrounding countryside. It also stood near important royal hunting lands and close to the Dorset coast.

The Keep

MEDIEVAL KINGS AND ROYAL PRISONERS

During the Middle Ages, Corfe Castle remained in royal hands for long periods. King John used it frequently, and his reign gives the castle some of its most severe associations. John valued strong castles as places of security, storage and imprisonment. Corfe was one of the places where royal treasure and important prisoners could be held.

Several prisoners were kept there in harsh conditions. The castle's reputation as a prison grew during John's reign, and it was associated with political ruthlessness as much as royal administration.

Henry III also used Corfe, and later medieval kings continued to maintain it. Over time, however, as warfare changed and royal government developed, castles such as Corfe became less central to royal power. They could still be useful, but they were no longer the only means by which kings controlled the country.



Corfe Castle

FROM ROYAL CASTLE TO PRIVATE ESTATE

In the later Middle Ages and early modern period, Corfe passed through various hands. By the 16th century, it had become less important as a royal fortress. Elizabeth I eventually sold the castle, and in the 17th century it came into the possession of Sir John Banks, Attorney General to Charles I.

This transfer from royal stronghold to private estate was common in the history of many English castles. Some were modernised into comfortable houses. Others declined or were partly adapted. Corfe retained much of its military strength, which would soon matter again.

ENGLISH CIVIL WAR

Corfe Castle's most famous chapter came during the English Civil War.

The Banks family were Royalists, loyal to King Charles I, while much of the surrounding area came under Parliamentary influence. In 1643, with Sir John Banks away serving the king, the defence of the castle was led by his wife, Lady Mary Banks.

Lady Banks became one of the best-known Royalist women of the war. According to later accounts, she and a small garrison resisted a much larger Parliamentary force. The first siege failed, and Corfe remained a Royalist stronghold.

The castle held out for several years, but its position became increasingly difficult as the war turned against the king.

In 1645, Corfe was betrayed from within. A member of the garrison allowed Parliamentary soldiers to enter, and the castle finally fell.



Lady Mary Banks

SLIGHTING AND RUIN

After its capture, Parliament ordered Corfe Castle to be slighted. Slighting meant deliberately damaging a castle so it could not be used again as a military stronghold or hiding place for fugitives.

At Corfe, this destruction was especially dramatic. Walls were undermined, towers broken, and large sections pulled apart or blasted.

The result is the ruin seen today: not the product of slow decay alone, but of deliberate political and military action. The leaning walls and shattered towers are part of the castle's story.

They show the moment when medieval fortification finally met the realities of 17th-century civil war.

The Bankes family later recovered the estate after the Restoration of Charles II, but the castle was not rebuilt. Instead, the family made their main seat at Kingston Lacy, where many materials and associations from Corfe were preserved.



CORFE'S LATER REPUTATION

In later centuries, Corfe Castle became admired as a romantic ruin. Artists, writers and travellers were drawn to its dramatic silhouette and Civil War story. The figure of Lady Mary Bankes gave the site a strong narrative of loyalty and endurance, while the broken walls gave physical form to the violence of the war.

The castle also developed a lighter literary association through Enid Blyton. Corfe is often linked with the inspiration for Kirrin Castle in the 'Famous Five' stories.

This connection belongs more to the 20th-century imagination than to the castle's medieval history, but it has helped keep Corfe familiar to generations of readers.



LESSER KNOWN BRITISH CASTLES

STRAWBERRY HILL

Strawberry Hill is not a castle in the usual medieval sense. It was not built to defend a coast, command a border or hold off an army. It had no Norman keep, no moat designed for war, and no long record of siege or royal imprisonment. Yet it belongs naturally in an issue about castles and literature, because Strawberry Hill helped shape the way later generations imagined castles.

Created by Horace Walpole in Twickenham in the 18th century, Strawberry Hill was a Gothic Revival house: part home, part museum, part theatrical fantasy. Its towers, battlements, pointed arches and medieval details were deliberately designed to suggest the atmosphere of an old castle. Walpole was not reconstructing the Middle Ages with scholarly precision. He was inventing a mood.

HORACE WALPOLE

Horace Walpole was born in 1717, the son of Sir Robert Walpole, often regarded as Britain's first prime minister (there's some debate about the exact definition of the term). He became a politician, writer, collector and one of the great letter-writers of his age.

In 1747 he acquired a modest house at Twickenham, then a fashionable riverside area outside London. Over the following decades, he transformed it into something much stranger and more original.

WALPOLE'S VILLA

The house became known as Strawberry Hill. Walpole enlarged it in stages, adding towers, battlements, traceried windows, fan vaulting, coloured glass and rooms filled with historic objects.

The result was not a fortress but a carefully composed Gothic world. It was a place designed to surprise visitors and to reflect its owner's taste for history, antiquarianism and imagination.

Strawberry Hill was also one of the most influential buildings of the Gothic Revival. At a time when classical architecture still dominated fashionable building, Walpole turned instead to medieval forms.

He made Gothic architecture playful, domestic and literary.



Horace Walpole

A CASTLE WITHOUT A WAR

Most castles began with a practical purpose. They controlled territory, protected owners and projected power. Strawberry Hill was different. It was a castle of atmosphere rather than necessity.

Its battlements were not defensive. Its towers were not watchtowers in the military sense. Its Gothic interiors were not survivals from the Middle Ages but 18th-century inventions. That is what makes the house so interesting. Walpole took the visual language of castles and churches and used it to create a private world of memory, romance and display.

This does not make Strawberry Hill less important. In some ways, it makes it more revealing. By Walpole's time, many medieval castles had lost their original military purpose. Ruins were increasingly admired for their beauty, age and emotional effect. Strawberry Hill shows that shift very clearly. The castle had moved from battlefield to imagination.

THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO

Strawberry Hill's literary importance rests above all on Walpole's novel 'The Castle of Otranto', first published in 1764. The book is often described as the first Gothic novel in English. It has many of the elements that later became familiar in Gothic fiction: an ancient castle, family secrets, supernatural events, fear, inheritance, power and mystery.

According to Walpole, the novel was inspired by a nightmare he had at Strawberry Hill. Whether taken literally or not, the connection between the house and the book is clear. Strawberry Hill gave Walpole a setting in which Gothic architecture, medieval history and imagination could come together.

A HOUSE FULL OF OBJECTS

Strawberry Hill was also built around Walpole's collection. He filled the house with paintings, manuscripts, armour, antiquities, portraits, curiosities and objects connected with British history.

This collecting mattered. Strawberry Hill was not simply a decorative exercise. Walpole used the house to arrange history around himself. Each room told visitors something about taste, memory, lineage and the past. The house was theatrical, but it was not empty theatre. It reflected a serious interest in old objects and historical association. The collection later became famous in its own right, though much of it was dispersed after Walpole's death in 1797.





GOTHIC REVIVAL AND LATER INFLUENCE

The Gothic Revival became much more widespread in the 19th century, affecting churches, universities, country houses and even the Houses of Parliament. Strawberry Hill was not the only source of that movement, but it was one of its most famous early expressions.

Its style was sometimes called 'Strawberry Hill Gothic': delicate, decorative, picturesque and imaginative. It was not the heavy military Gothic of a medieval fortress. It was lighter, more playful and more theatrical. That made it especially influential in the world of taste and domestic architecture. The house also helped change attitudes towards the medieval past. Gothic architecture had once been dismissed by many as old-fashioned or barbarous. Walpole treated it as romantic, expressive and full of feeling.

Quiz Answers: 1. Cornwall; 2. Merlin; 3. Geoffrey of Monmouth; 4. Warwickshire; 5. Elizabeth I; 6. Strawberry Hill; 7. The Castle of Otranto; 8. Prime Minister; 9. Dorset; 10. The English Civil War; 11. Lady Mary Bankes; 12. Alnwick Castle; 13. The Percy family; 14. Slains Castle; 15. Cruden Bay; 16. Evelyn Waugh; 17. Gothic fiction; 18. Purbeck Hills; 19. Enid Blyton; 20. Twickenham.



British Castles Magazine

published by british-castles.com