

# British Castles

May 2026



Castle Prisons  
Castles That Have Served As Jails



# EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

Welcome to the May 2026 issue of the British Castles magazine, which has a Castle Prisons theme.

Many castles have served as prisons over the last 1,000 years. All the attributes that make them great places to keep invaders out are also perfect for keeping prisoners in.

Our first article profiles the most prominent of these, including the stories of some of their famous inmates.

Our second looks at one in particular: Lancaster Castle. The castle was not only 'home' to the famous Pendle Witches but only closed as a prison in 2011.

Our 'Lesser Known British Castle' is Blackness Castle in Scotland - a striking castle and famous prison.

Both our quiz and gallery are, as you'd expect, of the castles featured in the articles.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this month's edition

Chris



# CASTLE PRISONS

## BRITISH HISTORY'S NOTORIOUS PRISON FORTRESSES

When we think of castles, we tend to picture pageantry - kings and queens, tournaments, feasts. But for a surprising number of people across the centuries, a castle wasn't a backdrop for romance. It was somewhere they were locked in and couldn't leave. Britain's castles have been doing double duty as prisons for almost as long as they've been standing, and some of their stories are genuinely extraordinary.

Here's a look at five of the best - with a nod to two more that deserve articles of their own.



## THE TOWER OF LONDON

This first one may surprise you. Not that the Tower of London was a prison - it's probably the most famous prison in British history - but that it's a castle.

However that was its original purpose, the White Tower at the centre of the complex was built by William the Conqueror just after 1066.

The Tower's life as a prison began almost as soon as it was built. Ranulf Flambard, Bishop of Durham, became its first recorded prisoner in 1100, and he also holds the distinction of being its first escapee - he lowered himself out of a window on a rope smuggled in with a barrel of wine. Not a bad effort.

Over the following centuries, the Tower held an extraordinary cast of characters, many of them transported into the prison via river through the notorious Traitors Gate.

Anne Boleyn spent time there before her execution on Tower Green in 1536. Sir Walter Raleigh was imprisoned there three separate times.

Rudolf Hess, Hitler's deputy, was briefly held there in 1941 - the last state prisoner in the Tower's history.

Nearly 900 years of locking people up, and those are just the highlights..

Traitors Gate, Tower of London

## CARLISLE CASTLE, CUMBRIA

Carlisle tends to get overshadowed by more famous castles further south, which is a shame, because its prison history is genuinely vivid. The castle's most dramatic chapter came after the failed Jacobite rising of 1745. Following Bonnie Prince Charlie's retreat north, hundreds of his supporters were rounded up and crammed into Carlisle Castle. Conditions were, by any measure, grim. So grim, in fact, that prisoners resorted to licking moisture from the stone walls to survive. You can still see those walls today - worn smooth in patches - and the guides will tell you exactly why.

Carlisle also held Scottish prisoners during the long, grinding border conflicts of the medieval period, and the castle's position right on the England-Scotland border gave it a strategic importance that kept its cells busy for centuries.

## DOVER CASTLE, KENT

Dover's position - perched on the white cliffs directly across from France - has made it militarily significant for almost every era of British history. It's also been a prison for rather longer than most people realise.

The castle held prisoners as far back as the medieval period, but its most sustained use as a place of confinement came much later.

Its tunnels and chambers were used to hold French prisoners during the Napoleonic Wars, when the south of England was full of captured soldiers and officers waiting out the conflict. Some prisoners were held for years.

What makes Dover interesting from a prison history perspective is the sheer physicality of the place. The cliffs, the sea, the height - escape wasn't merely difficult, it was essentially impossible. The castle didn't need to try particularly hard to be a good prison. Geography did most of the work.



## PONTEFRACT CASTLE, YORKSHIRE

Pontefract is perhaps the least well-known castle on this list, but it has one of the darkest reputations. For centuries it was known locally as 'the key to the north, and its dungeons were feared accordingly.

Its most famous prisoner was King Richard II, who was brought here after being deposed by Henry Bolingbroke in 1399. Richard died at Pontefract early in 1400 - the exact circumstances remain unclear, with starvation the most likely cause, though the historical record is deliberately murky.

A king dying in a dungeon was not something anyone particularly wanted written down in detail. The castle was also the site of multiple executions and imprisonments during the Wars of the Roses, and later during the Civil War, when it was one of the last Royalist strongholds to hold out against Parliament.

By the time it finally fell, Cromwell ordered it demolished. Even in ruins, though, Pontefract has an atmosphere that's hard to shake.



## WINDSOR CASTLE, BERKSHIRE

Windsor tends to get thought of as a royal residence first and foremost, and understandably so - it's been a working royal home for nearly a thousand years. But it has a prison history that's easy to forget.

Its most notable prisoners were royal captives of genuine importance. King John II of France was held at Windsor after being captured at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356 - he was treated well, as befitted his rank, but he was unquestionably a prisoner, and a valuable one. King David II of Scotland spent time here too, after being captured at the Battle of Neville's Cross in 1346.

These weren't dungeons-and-bread-and-water situations - high-status prisoners in the medieval period were often held in something closer to comfortable house arrest, with servants and some freedom of movement within the castle. But make no mistake: they were there because they had no choice.

## AND TWO MORE WORTH KNOWING ABOUT...

We haven't touched on Lancaster Castle, which has perhaps the most remarkable prison story of all - it was still operating as a working prison until 2011, giving it a continuous history that no other castle in Britain can match. Or Blackness Castle in Scotland, which served as a state prison for centuries and is one of the most atmospheric and underrated fortresses in the country.

Both of those deserve more space than a paragraph, so we'll be giving them features of their own in this edition.



Windsor Castle

# QUIZ: PRISON CASTLES

See if you can match the castles locations mentioned elsewhere in this issue, and listed below, with its photo. Each castle can appear more than once. Answers on page 24

Carlisle Castle

Pontefract Castle

Windsor Castle

Dover Castle

Blackness Castle

Lancaster Castle





# GALLERY: CASTLES PRISONS



White Tower, Tower Of London

# Carlisle Castle



Windsor Castle





Lancaster Castle



## Inside Grounds Of Windsor Castle

# Blackness Castle





Dover Castle Gatehouse



# LANCASTER CASTLE

BRITAIN'S LONGEST-SERVING PRISON

Lancaster Castle was still a working prison until 2011. Not a heritage attraction, not a museum piece — an actual functioning jail, with inmates and staff and locked doors, right up until the Ministry of Justice decided it wasn't worth the running costs anymore.

That fact reframes everything else about the place. Most castles invite you to imagine their history. Lancaster's is close enough to touch. And it stretches, more or less unbroken, from the 11th century to the present day — which makes it unlike almost anywhere else in Britain.

## HOW IT STARTED

The castle sits on a hill above the River Lune, on a site that's been strategically important since the Romans. The current structure dates largely from the 11th and 12th centuries, built by the Normans to assert control over the northwest of England — a region that had a habit of being difficult.

Roger of Poitou gets the credit for the first significant construction, around 1093, though the castle was extended and strengthened by various hands over the following centuries. John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and father of Henry IV, carried out major works in the late 14th century, and the distinctive gatehouse towers that greet you today are largely his legacy.

For most of its early life, Lancaster functioned as any medieval castle did - administrative centre, military stronghold, the seat of local power. But its role as a place of justice and confinement developed early, and it was this side of its character that would eventually come to define it.



Entrance to Lancaster Castle Prison

## THE WITCHES OF PENDLE

If Lancaster Castle has one story above all others, it's this one.

In 1612, twenty people from the Pendle area of Lancashire were brought to Lancaster to stand trial for witchcraft.

The accusations had their roots in a series of deaths and illnesses in the local community, and in the deep mutual suspicion between two rival families - the Demdikes and the Chattox - who had been trading accusations of witchcraft against each other for years.

The trials were, by the standards of their time, well-documented. The court clerk Thomas Potts wrote a detailed account afterwards, which means we know the stories in unusual detail.

We know that old Demdike - Elizabeth Southernnes, in her eighties and nearly blind - died in the castle dungeons before the trial even began. We know that ten of the accused were hanged on Gallows Hill outside the town. We know the names: Alice Nutter, Alizon Device, who confessed readily; James Device, who recanted; Anne Whittle, known as Chattox.

What we can't know, from this distance, is how much of it was real - real belief, real fear, real accusation - and how much was neighbour turning on neighbour under pressure.

The Pendle witches have become one of the most debated episodes in English legal history, and Lancaster Castle is where their story reached its terrible conclusion.



Statue of Alice Nutter

## THREE CENTURIES OF HANGINGS

The Pendle trials were dramatic, but they weren't unusual for Lancaster. The castle served as the county's main criminal court for Lancashire for centuries, and the Assizes held here dealt with everything from sheep-stealing to murder.

By the 18th century, public executions outside the castle gates had become something of a local event - grim by modern standards, but treated at the time as public spectacle.

The reformer John Howard visited Lancaster in the 1770s and was appalled by what he found. The conditions in the castle's prisons - overcrowding, disease, near-total darkness in some cells - prompted him to write about Lancaster specifically in his landmark work on prison conditions. It didn't change things immediately, but it was part of a wider movement that would eventually drag the British prison system, slowly and reluctantly, into something more humane.

The Shire Hall, built in the late 18th century within the castle complex, is one of the finest Georgian courtrooms in the country - a beautiful room in which a great deal of very unbeautiful justice was dispensed.

## THE DROP ROOM

One detail that tends to stay with visitors is the Drop Room.

This small, unremarkable-looking chamber is where prisoners condemned to death spent their final hours before execution. The name comes from the trapdoor mechanism used for hangings. There's not much to look at, which perhaps makes it more affecting rather than less.



Lancaster executed more people than almost anywhere else in England outside London, and this room is where many of them waited.

The last public execution at Lancaster took place in 1865.

After that, hangings moved inside the prison walls, out of public view - a reform that arrived in Britain rather later than many people assumed.

## A PRISON UNTIL 2011

What makes Lancaster genuinely unique is that all of this history didn't end in the Victorian era, or the Edwardian era, or even mid-20th century. HM Prison Lancaster Castle was a functioning Category C prison until March 2011, when the Ministry of Justice decided it was no longer cost-effective to run.

For most of its final decades, it housed adult male prisoners, and staff and inmates moved through corridors and courtyards that had been doing exactly the same job for hundreds of years. The medieval walls held modern cell blocks. The castle that John of Gaunt built was still, in the most literal sense, locking people up.

Since its closure as a prison, Lancaster Castle has been gradually opened to the public and is now a visitor attraction and events venue. The Crown Court continued to sit there until 2016. Restoration work is ongoing.



Prison Sign

## WORTH A VISIT

Lancaster doesn't have the profile of the Tower of London or the grandeur of Windsor, but for anyone interested in the real texture of British history — not the pageantry, but the justice, the fear, the everyday machinery of power — it's hard to beat.

Almost a thousand years of continuous use, and the walls remember all of it.



# LESSER KNOWN BRITISH CASTLES

## BLACKNESS CASTLE

Most castles are built to look imposing. Blackness manages it without really trying. It sits on a narrow rocky promontory jutting into the Firth of Forth, about five miles east of Linlithgow, and from a distance it looks less like a building and more like a stone ship that's run aground and decided to stay. That's not a modern observation — the castle has been known as “the ship that never sailed” for centuries, and once you've seen it, the nickname is obvious.

It's also one of Scotland's most important and least visited historic sites, with a prison history that runs deep and dark and spans nearly three centuries.

## HOW IT WAS BUILT

Blackness dates from the early 15th century, built largely by Sir George Crichton, a powerful figure in the Scottish court of James I. The Crichton family didn't hold it for long — the crown acquired it in 1453, and it remained a royal castle from that point on.

Its position on the Forth made it strategically valuable both as a military fortification and as a port. Ships could land directly at the castle walls, which made it useful for moving supplies, troops, and — as would become significant — prisoners. You couldn't easily besiege it from the water, and the landward approach was narrow and easily defended. It was, in other words, a natural jail even before anyone decided to use it as one.

The castle was strengthened considerably in the late 15th and 16th centuries to accommodate artillery, and the thick curtain walls that survive today date largely from this period. The three towers — which visitors inevitably end up thinking of as bow, stern and mast once the ship analogy takes hold — were added and modified over time, each serving different functions as the castle's role evolved.

## A STATE PRISON

From the mid-15th century onwards, Blackness became one of Scotland's principal state prisons, used to hold political prisoners and others whose imprisonment the crown had a particular interest in managing carefully.

This wasn't a place for ordinary criminals. The people sent to Blackness were generally sent there because they were dangerous, or embarrassing, or both — nobles who had fallen from favour, religious dissidents, political enemies of whoever currently held power in Edinburgh. Given how frequently power changed hands in 16th century Scotland, that kept the castle reasonably busy.

One of its more notable early prisoners was Patrick Hamilton, the Protestant reformer, who was held at Blackness in the 1520s before his eventual execution by burning in St Andrews in 1528. Hamilton is considered the first martyr of the Scottish Reformation, and his time at Blackness was part of a broader attempt by Cardinal Beaton and the Catholic establishment to suppress the growing Protestant movement — an attempt that ultimately failed rather comprehensively.



Blackness Castle

# THE COVENANTERS

If there's a single period that defines Blackness as a prison, it's probably the mid-17th century, during the conflict between the Scottish Covenanters and the crown.

The Covenanters were Presbyterians who had signed the National Covenant of 1638, committing themselves to resist what they saw as attempts by Charles I - and later Charles II - to impose episcopacy (government of the church by bishops, rather than by elected presbyteries) on the Scottish church.

The conflict that followed was long, complicated, and violent, and Blackness was used to hold significant numbers of Covenanting prisoners at various points during it.

Conditions were not comfortable. The castle was cold, damp and exposed - the Forth weather sees to that - and the cells were basic.

For prisoners held during the worst periods of what became known as the 'Killing Time' in the 1680s, Blackness represented a grim halfway house between capture and whatever came next, which was often a trial in Edinburgh and a sentence of transportation, imprisonment or death.

The religious politics of this period can feel remote now, but the human reality of it - men imprisoned for their beliefs in a stone fortress on a windswept promontory - is straightforward enough.



Inside Blackness Castle

## AFTER THE PRISON YEARS

Blackness's life as a state prison wound down in the later 17th century, though the castle remained in military use for considerably longer.

It served as an ammunition depot for much of the 18th and 19th centuries, which is actually one of the reasons it survives in such good condition - military installations tend to be maintained rather than left to crumble.

The castle was repaired and consolidated in the late 19th century under the supervision of the architect Andrew Kerr, and it passed eventually into state care. It's now managed by Historic Environment Scotland and is open to visitors.

In recent years it's gained a new and somewhat unexpected audience through its appearances in the television series *Outlander*, which has brought a lot of visitors to a castle that was previously known mainly to history enthusiasts and people who live nearby. Whatever gets people through the gate.



The South Tower

## WORTH THE TRIP

Blackness is easy to reach - it's about half an hour from Edinburgh - and it's the kind of place that rewards a bit of prior reading. On the surface it can seem like a fairly austere ruin on a cold stretch of water. Once you know what happened here, and to whom, the atmosphere shifts considerably.

The views across the Forth are genuinely striking, the castle itself is well-preserved, and the combination of its unusual shape, its exposed position and its layered history makes it one of the more distinctive historic sites in Scotland. It doesn't shout about itself the way more famous castles do. But it doesn't need to.

**Quiz Answers:** 1. Pontefract Castle; 2. Windsor Castle; 3. Carlisle Castle; 4. Windsor Castle; 5. Dover Castle; 6. Blackness Castle; 7. Carlisle Castle; 8. Blackness Castle; 10. Dover Castle; 11. Carlisle Castle; 12. Dover Castle; 13. Windsor Castle; 14. Windsor Castle

A close-up photograph of a wooden gate. The gate features a lattice pattern of weathered wooden beams. A black rectangular sign with white text is mounted on a horizontal wooden beam. Below the sign, a row of sharp, pointed wooden spikes is visible. The gate is constructed from heavy, dark wood with visible metal bolts and hinges.

TRAITORS' GATE

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