

British Castles

October 2025



Castles At War

British Castles Involved In Sieges & Battles



EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

Welcome to the October 2025 issue of the British Castles Magazine.

This month we focus on the castles involved in the many wars in British history. Most castles are military construction of course, but some have been particularly active because of importance, location etc. Our first feature looks at these.

Our second feature looks at the main tactic used against castles, siege warfare, and how it changed over time as technology improved.

Our picture quiz is, as you'd expect, of castles involved in war, as is our gallery.

Our 'Lesser Known British Castle' is Donnington Castle in Berkshire, which still bears the scars of the Civil War siege against it.

Anyway I hope you enjoy the issue

Chris

A photograph of the ruins of Kenilworth Castle, a large stone structure with multiple towers and walls, set against a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The foreground is a lush green field with a dirt path leading towards the ruins. A person is visible near the base of the castle walls.

CASTLES OF WAR

CASTLES BESIEGED

Castles have been the scene of many a battle or siege over the course of British history. Here, though, are some of the more prominent places, where war was fought.

SCARBOROUGH CASTLE

Scarborough Castle stands high on a headland overlooking the North Sea, which made it strategically valuable for controlling Yorkshire's coast. During the English Civil War, it became a stronghold for Royalists.

It was besieged twice by Parliamentary forces, first in 1645 and again in 1648. The 1645 siege was particularly destructive: heavy cannon fire badly damaged the keep, and the garrison held out until disease and hunger forced surrender. Its exposed coastal position also made it vulnerable to attack from the sea, which is why it was contested so fiercely in that conflict.

EDINBURGH CASTLE

Edinburgh Castle has been under siege more times than almost any other stronghold in Britain, largely because whoever controlled it also controlled Scotland's capital.

In the Wars of Scottish Independence in the late 1200s to early 1300s, it changed hands repeatedly between the English and Scots.

One of the most famous moments came in 1314, when a small Scottish force led by Thomas Randolph scaled the cliffs at night and recaptured it from the English.

Later, during the so-called "Lang Siege" in the 1570s, supporters of Mary, Queen of Scots, held out against forces loyal to her son James VI, which left the castle heavily damaged.



Depiction Of Edinburgh Castle during the Lang Siege

CARLISLE CASTLE

Carlisle Castle's position near the border with Scotland meant it was attacked frequently, especially in the long series of Anglo-Scottish wars. It was besieged in 1315 by Robert the Bruce after his victory at Bannockburn, but he failed to take it.

The castle saw further action during the English Civil War in the 1640s, when Royalist forces garrisoned it and endured an eight-month siege by Parliamentary troops. Hunger forced the defenders to surrender, and the castle passed into Parliament's hands.

DOVER CASTLE

Known as the “Key to England” because of its role guarding the shortest crossing point from France, Dover Castle came under threat whenever England faced invasion from the Continent.

During the First Barons’ War in the early 13th century, Prince Louis of France landed in England and besieged Dover in 1216. Though he made breaches in the walls, the garrison held out, and the siege ended in stalemate. Later, in the 1260s, it was again contested during the Second Barons’ War, when royal forces used it to resist rebel barons.

STIRLING CASTLE

Stirling Castle sat at the main crossing point of the River Forth, so it was a natural focal point in the Wars of Scottish Independence. The English garrisoned it after Edward I’s campaigns, but the Scots retook it after the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297. A year later, Edward returned and besieged it with huge siege engines, forcing the Scots to yield.

d. It changed hands several more times, with another famous episode being the 1304 siege, when Edward used a massive trebuchet named “Warwolf.” Each side wanted Stirling because it was seen as the gateway to the Highlands.



Stirling Castle

PONTEFRACT CASTLE

Pontefract played a major role in the English Civil War. Strongly held by Royalists, it was besieged three times by Parliamentary forces between 1644 and 1649.

It held out so long partly because it was a formidable fortress, but also because it was supplied by surrounding Royalist sympathisers.

The final siege only ended after the execution of Charles I, when the Royalist garrison finally gave up. Its reputation as a Royalist stronghold was so strong that Parliament ordered it to be demolished to prevent it being used again.



Ruins Of Pontefract Castle

KENILWORTH CASTLE

Kenilworth was at the heart of one of the longest sieges in English history. During the Second Barons' War in 1266, rebels supporting Simon de Montfort's cause held the castle against royal forces. The siege lasted six months, largely because the castle had an artificial lake around it, making assaults very difficult.

In the end, starvation and disease weakened the garrison until they accepted terms. The siege showed how effective strong defences could be, but also how determined royal authority was to stamp out rebellion.

DONNINGTON CASTLE

Donnington Castle, near Newbury, is best remembered for its role in the English Civil War. Royalist forces fortified it early in the conflict, and it was repeatedly attacked by Parliamentarians. The most significant action came during the Second Battle of Newbury in 1644, when the castle's guns supported Royalist troops in the field.

Afterwards, Parliamentary forces laid siege to it for months. Though badly damaged by cannon fire, the Royalist garrison held out until 1646, when the broader collapse of the Royalist cause made further resistance pointless.

QUIZ: CASTLES OF WAR

See if you can match the castle mentioned in this issue with its photo. Answers on page 24.

Oxford Castle

Carlisle Castle

Edinburgh Castle

Stirling Castle

Rochester Castle

Pontefract Castle

Dover Castle

Warwick Castle

Donnington Castle

Scarborough Castle

Corfe Castle

Kenilworth Castle





Dover Castle



GALLERY: CASTLES AT WAR



Rochester Castle



Edinburgh Castle



Kenilworth Castle



Scarborough Castle



Gun, Edinburgh Castle



Stirling Castle



SIEGE WARFARE

HOW CASTLE SIEGE TACTICS CHANGED OVER TIME

The main form of warfare associated with castles is the siege. An enemy holed up in a well stocked castle could survive for weeks if not months. Over the course of the past 1000 years then, techniques developed to break such sieges, each evolving as technology developed.

Here then is a brief history of these techniques and how they were deployed...

12TH AND EARLY 13TH CENTURIES

When the Normans first brought stone castles to England and Wales in the 11th and 12th centuries, attackers relied on very direct methods. At Rochester in 1215, during King John's struggle with the rebel barons, besiegers set fire to the wooden props holding up a mine dug beneath the keep.

The fire was fed with pig fat to make it burn hot enough, and when the supports gave way, one corner of the great tower collapsed. Even then the defenders fought on in the ruins until hunger forced surrender. Mining and burning like that was a standard method when faced with thick stone walls.

At the same time, siege towers, ladders, and rams were used. During King Stephen's troubled reign in the mid-12th century (the period known as "the Anarchy"), castles such as Oxford were stormed by direct assaults with wooden towers rolled up against the walls.

Yet these efforts were costly and often failed. More often than not, besiegers simply tried to starve out the defenders.



Rochester Castle

LATE 13TH TO 15TH CENTURIES

By the 13th and early 14th centuries, things had grown more elaborate. The great stone castles of Edward I's campaigns in Wales—Conwy, Caernarfon, Harlech, and others—were all designed with sieges in mind, surrounded by water and thick walls.

But even so, they were tested. Harlech Castle held out from 1294 to 1295 during a Welsh uprising, supplied by sea when land routes were blocked.

Later, in the Wars of the Roses, Harlech endured another siege, lasting from 1461 until 1468, remembered in the song “Men of Harlech.”

In both cases, control of supply lines made the difference, and the defenders lasted as long as food arrived.



Replica Of Warwulf

Mechanical siege engines also reached their peak in this period. At Stirling in 1304, Edward I brought up a massive trebuchet—nicknamed the “Warwolf”—to hammer down the walls.

The Scots inside asked to surrender before it was even used, but Edward insisted on firing it anyway to demonstrate his new machine. These huge engines hurled boulders weighing hundreds of pounds, shattering towers that had once seemed impregnable.

15TH TO 17TH CENTURIES

Then came gunpowder.

The first use of cannon in British sieges came in the 14th century, and by the 15th they were decisive. At Roxburgh in 1460, the Scottish King James II was killed when one of his own cannon exploded, a reminder of how dangerous early artillery could be. But the potential was clear: high medieval walls were not designed to withstand heavy shot. At Norham on the River Tweed, bombards smashed through once-formidable towers, forcing new ideas in defence.

By the 16th and 17th centuries, artillery had become central. Medieval castles were still used, but their tall, thin walls were dangerously outdated. During the English Civil War in the 1640s, castles all over the country were dragged back into service, with mixed fortunes.

At Pontefract in Yorkshire, a Royalist stronghold, Parliamentary armies besieged it three times. Cannon fire and blockade reduced the defenders to starvation before they finally surrendered in 1649.

At Corfe Castle in Dorset, Lady Mary Bankes and her small garrison held out for years against bombardment, only for the place to fall at last through betrayal from within.

Donnington Castle near Newbury shows what artillery meant in practice.

Royalists fortified it with earthworks and gun platforms, but Parliament's cannon still battered the walls to rubble.

Only the gatehouse survived, standing amid the destruction when the garrison finally gave up in 1646.

You can still see the scars today, and it tells the story of how stone castles couldn't stand up to sustained cannon fire.





Trebuchet, Urquhart Castle

Sieges in this period became more systematic. Attackers didn't just camp outside; they dug approach trenches in zigzags, set up batteries at closer range, and tried to create a breach in the walls.

At Newark Castle, held by Royalists, Parliament's armies used artillery and blockades in a methodical way until the defenders surrendered on orders from Charles I himself in 1646.

After the Civil War, Parliament deliberately slighted many castles—pulling down walls and filling in moats—so they could never be used again.

Pontefract, Corfe, and others were left as ruins. From then on, Britain had fewer true sieges, because castles were obsolete.

Military engineering shifted towards star-shaped forts like those on the coast, designed for cannon rather than archers.

18TH & 19TH CENTURIES

By the 18th and early 19th centuries, siegecraft across Europe had become a science, perfected by engineers such as Vauban in France. But in Britain itself, castles had passed into another life: romantic ruins in the landscape, or stately homes adapted for comfort.

By the Victorian age, people were more likely to picnic at a ruined gatehouse than to fight over it.

CHANGING TACTICS

Looking back over this thousand years, the tactics really fall into four main groups: break through (with rams, trebuchets, or cannon), climb over (with ladders or towers), dig under (with mines and fire), or starve out (with blockade).

The methods changed, but the basic choices stayed the same. If you stand at a ruined castle today—say the shattered walls at Rochester or the lonely gatehouse at Donnington—you can still see the marks of those struggles written in the stone.



Cannon In Lyme Regis, Dorset



Donnington Castle

LESSER KNOWN BRITISH CASTLES

DONNINGTON CASTLE

Donnington Castle, which sits just outside Newbury in Berkshire, doesn't look much at first glance as only the twin-towered gatehouse survives intact, but the place has a history that more than makes up for the missing walls.

It is one of those sites where you get a sense of the way a small, unassuming ruin can have played a surprisingly large part in national events.

INITIAL CASTLE

The story begins in the late fourteenth century, when Sir Richard Abberbury was given licence to crenellate his house.

That licence effectively meant he could turn his residence into a fortified castle, and he did so with enthusiasm.

The design was fairly typical for the time: a rectangular courtyard, corner towers, curtain walls, and a central gatehouse to guard the approach.

Not long afterwards, the estate passed to Thomas Chaucer, the son of the poet Geoffrey Chaucer, which adds a literary link to its history.

Chaucer's writing, including the Canturbury Tales are synonymous with this period of medieval England, and its fitting that he had such a close link to that most medieval of monuments, the castle.

Later, the castle came into the hands of the Crown, being granted to several royal favourites across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.



ENGLISH CIVIL WAR

What really brought Donnington into prominence, though, was the English Civil War in the seventeenth century. By then, its medieval design was rather outdated, but it was still defensible, and its position overlooking the road to Oxford gave it strategic value.

Royalist forces seized it early in the conflict, and they strengthened it with earthworks and gun platforms. Those defences were soon put to the test, because Parliamentary armies could not ignore a fortress sitting so close to London's supply lines.

The castle saw action in both the First and Second Battles of Newbury, fought in 1643 and 1644. During the second engagement in particular, Donnington's garrison used its artillery to cover Royalist troops in the field.

After that, Parliament's commanders decided to contain the castle with a formal siege. They brought up heavy guns and battered the walls, reducing much of the medieval structure to rubble. Despite this, the defenders held out for over eighteen months, surviving bombardment and shortages.

They only surrendered in 1646, when King Charles's wider cause had collapsed. What you see today is largely the product of that siege: a ruined perimeter, earthworks visible on the ground, and the gatehouse standing resiliently amid the scars of war.

THE CASTLE TODAY

When you walk up to Donnington today, the first thing you notice is how small the site feels. The gatehouse rises quite starkly against the landscape, with its two towers framing the entrance arch.

The missing walls make it easier to imagine how exposed the defenders must have been once Parliament's cannon got to work. Yet there is also a sense of quiet resilience in the building's survival. It is not difficult to picture soldiers behind those arrow slits or lookouts scanning the fields from the upper chambers.



Donnington Castle

Visiting is straightforward: the castle is in the care of English Heritage, and access is free. You approach along a short path, and before you reach the gatehouse you can trace the outlines of the old earthworks.

They appear as grassy banks and ditches now, but if you pause a moment you realise they once housed gun platforms and provided shelter against bombardment

It's worth walking all the way around, because from the rear of the site you get wide views across the Berkshire countryside. On a clear day you can see how the high ground gave the garrison both an advantage and a burden: commanding views, but also exposure to any army advancing from the plain.

The gatehouse itself is roofless, though its stonework is in remarkably good condition. You can step inside and look up to the empty windows, where floors once divided the rooms. The doorway still feels imposing, even though it leads into open grass rather than an enclosed courtyard.



Donnington Castle

For a visit today, combine it with a walk into Newbury or through the nearby countryside. The site itself doesn't take long to explore, but it gives you a vivid glimpse of how a local stronghold could suddenly become a focal point of national conflict.

If you are interested in the Civil War, it makes a good pairing with the battlefields of Newbury, where interpretation boards and trails help you piece together what happened in 1643 and 1644. Standing at Donnington and then going out to the battlefield gives you a sense of how the castle's guns really mattered during those clashes. When you lean against the rough stone of the gatehouse, it is easy to imagine the sound of cannon fire echoing across the valley.

So while Donnington might not look like much compared to Dover or Edinburgh, it has its own quiet presence. Its history connects medieval foundations, Chaucer's family, royal patronage, and the upheavals of the Civil War. And for a visitor today, it offers a chance to stand in the middle of a ruin that was once at the centre of a very real struggle, then step back into the calm of the Berkshire countryside.

Quiz Answers 1. Donnington Castle; 2. Carlisle Castle; 3. Rochester Castle; 4. Scarborough Castle; 5. Pontefract Castle; 6. Oxford Castle; 7. Edinburgh Castle; 8. Corfe Castle; 9. Warwick Castle; 10. Kenilworth Castle; 11. Stirling Castle; 12. Dover Castle



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