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Castles & The Church

Religious & Secular Power Combined



EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

Welcome to the October 2026 issue of British Castles Magazine, which has a 'Castles & the Church' theme.

We're looking at a side of castle history that is easy to overlook: the close relationship between castles and the Church.

Bishops and other senior churchmen were not only religious figures. Many were also powerful landowners, royal advisers and administrators, and some controlled estates on a scale that required fortified residences of their own.

Our main feature looks at a selection of castles and palaces associated with the Church, including Durham, Wolvesey, St Davids, Farnham, St Andrews and Wells.

We then turn to the Prince-Bishops of Durham, whose unusual combination of spiritual and secular authority made them some of the most powerful churchmen in medieval England.

As ever, we have our gallery and quiz, both of which – as you'd expect – have a Castles & the Church theme.

Finally, we take a closer look at Farnham Castle, a residence with a long connection to the bishops of Winchester.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Chris, Editor



CASTLES & THE CHURCH

FORTIFIED RESIDENCES OF THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

The medieval Church was not concerned solely with matters of faith. Bishops could be great landowners, royal advisers, administrators and, in some parts of Britain, powerful political figures in their own right. Their wealth and status were reflected in the residences they built, some of which were every bit as imposing as the castles of the secular nobility.

Indeed, although some are known as bishops' or episcopal palaces, their walls, gatehouses and other defensive features can make them appear remarkably castle-like. From the stronghold of Durham's remarkable Prince-Bishops to the scene of violent Reformation struggles at St Andrews, these six buildings reveal a fascinating connection between castles and the Church.

DURHAM CASTLE

An excellent example of combined religious and secular power, Durham Castle was begun shortly after the Norman Conquest as part of the Norman effort to establish control over northern England, a region where resistance to Norman rule remained strong. Its position also became strategically important in the defence of the vulnerable northern border against potential invasions from Scotland.

The castle was soon handed to the Church, becoming the principal residence of the Bishops of Durham, known as Prince-Bishops, who exercised both religious and secular powers – the latter including administering justice, raising forces and governing extensive territories. Durham Castle stood opposite the great cathedral, creating a concentration of spiritual and temporal power on the rocky peninsula above the River Wear, and for centuries it served both as a fortified residence and as a symbol of the bishops' unusual status.

In the nineteenth century it became part of Durham University – it is now home to around 100 students – but much of its medieval character survives.



Wolvesey Castle

WOLVESEY CASTLE

Standing beside Winchester Cathedral, Wolvesey Castle was the main residence of the Bishops of Winchester, among the wealthiest and most influential men in England in the Middle Ages.

Winchester was a capital of the powerful kingdom of Wessex in Anglo-Saxon times - it was the home of Alfred the Great, for example - and a palace had existed on the site since 970 AD.

However, it was transformed into a far more imposing fortified residence during the twelfth century by Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester and brother of King Stephen.

Henry was deeply involved in the turbulent politics of the civil war known as the Anarchy - between Stephen and Empress Matilda - and created an impressive residence appropriate to his status.

Wolvesey was less a conventional military castle than a magnificent episcopal palace protected by substantial stone buildings and defences. Later bishops continued to use it, and in 1554 it hosted the wedding breakfast of Queen Mary I and Philip of Spain. Much of the medieval complex was eventually abandoned, leaving the extensive ruins that stand beside the cathedral today.

ST DAVIDS BISHOP'S PALACE, PEMBROKESHIRE

Beside the magnificent cathedral at St Davids stand the ruins of one of the finest medieval episcopal residences in Britain.

The Bishops of St Davids had occupied the site for centuries, but much of the surviving palace dates from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the increasingly wealthy bishopric required a residence appropriate to its importance.



St Davids Bishop's Palace

Bishop Henry de Gower, who held the see from 1328 to 1347, was particularly responsible for its transformation, and he created an impressive complex of halls, chambers and ceremonial spaces distinguished by an ornate arcaded parapet.

Although more palace than fortress, the buildings stood within a walled ecclesiastical precinct and projected the authority of the medieval Church. After the Reformation the palace gradually declined, leaving the atmospheric ruins that survive alongside St Davids Cathedral.

FARNHAM CASTLE

Farnham Castle in Surrey is another bishop's residence that was also very much a castle. Like Wolvesey, it was founded in the twelfth century by Henry of Blois, and its position between Winchester and London made Farnham a convenient stopping place for bishops travelling between their cathedral and the royal court.

The castle developed around a substantial motte and shell keep, while later generations added increasingly comfortable domestic accommodation. Farnham remained associated with the Bishops of Winchester for more than eight centuries, making it one of England's longest-lived episcopal residences.

Kings and other important guests were entertained within its walls, and the castle experienced political upheaval during both the medieval period and the English Civil War.

(Farnham Castle is the subject of a longer feature later in this issue)



St Andrews Castle

ST ANDREWS CASTLE

St Andrews Castle, now a ruin, occupies a dramatic position overlooking the North Sea and was closely connected with Scotland's most powerful medieval churchmen. Built as a residence for the Bishops of St Andrews, and later its archbishops, it stood close to the great cathedral at the centre of Scottish religious life and witnessed a particularly violent period during the Scottish Reformation.

In 1546, Protestant preacher George Wishart was imprisoned and executed at the castle on the orders of Cardinal David Beaton. A few months later, Protestant conspirators entered the fortress and murdered Beaton, subsequently occupying the castle themselves.

A prolonged siege followed, during which attackers dug a mine beneath the walls and defenders created a counter-mine to intercept them. French forces eventually captured the castle in 1547.

THE BISHOP'S PALACE, WELLS

Surrounded by a moat and entered through a fortified gatehouse, the Bishop's Palace at Wells looks remarkably castle-like for an ecclesiastical residence. It stands beside Wells Cathedral and has been home to the Bishops of Bath and Wells for centuries. Much of the medieval complex was developed from the thirteenth century onwards, beginning under Bishop Jocelin of Wells.

In the fourteenth century, Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury added the striking defensive walls, towers and moat that give the palace much of its present appearance. These fortifications were probably intended as much to express authority and provide security as to withstand a serious military siege: behind them stood the bishop's great hall, private chambers and chapel.

Unlike many medieval episcopal palaces, Wells is still the official residence of the Bishop of Bath and Wells, preserving a remarkable continuity stretching back through the Middle Ages.



Bishop's Palace, Wells



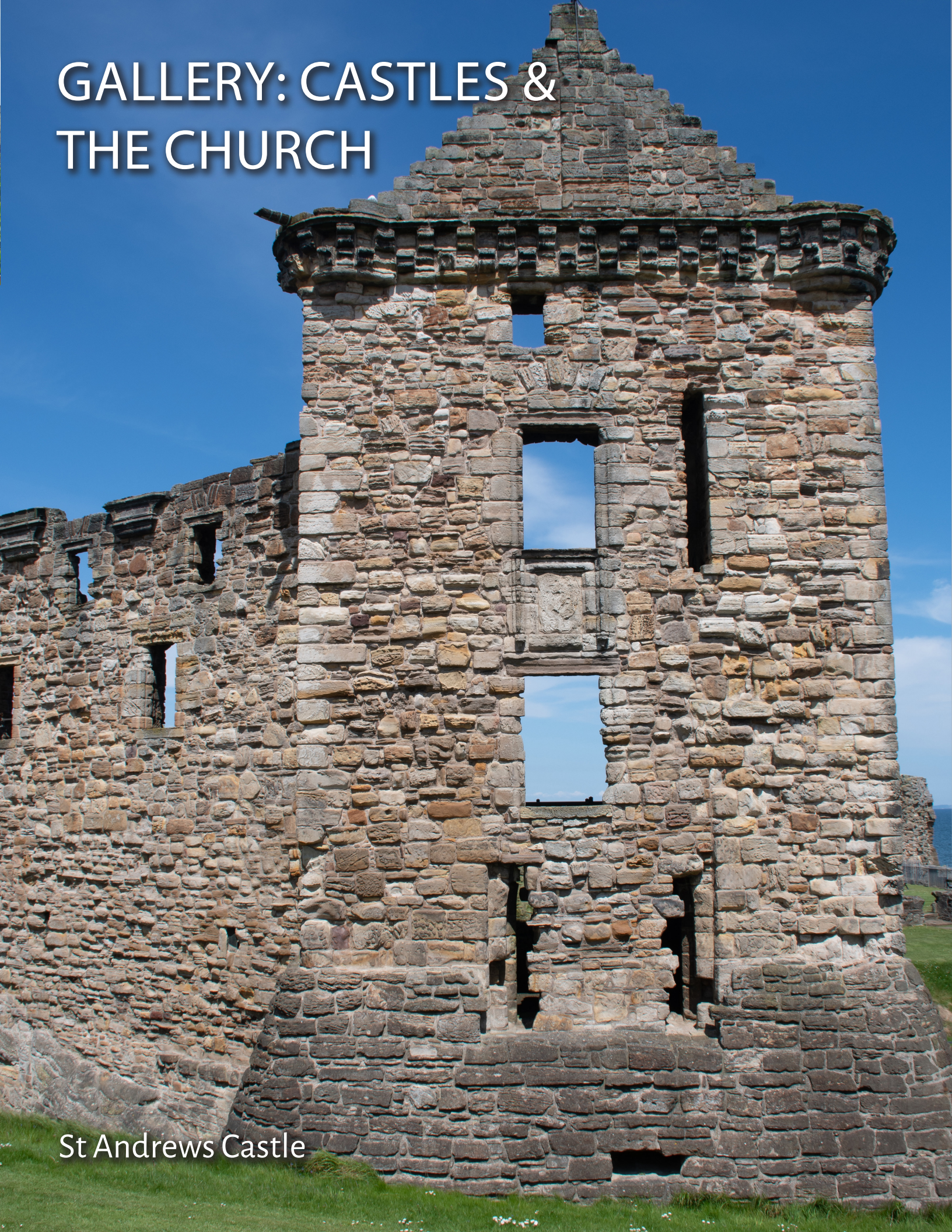


QUIZ: CASTLES AND THE CHURCH

Test your knowledge of Castles and the Church. Answers on page 20.

1. Which Norman bishop, brother of King Stephen, founded Farnham Castle and transformed Wolvesey Castle?
2. Which castle became the principal residence of the powerful Prince-Bishops of Durham?
3. Which Scottish castle was the scene of the murder of Cardinal David Beaton in 1546?
4. St Davids Bishop's Palace stands beside which important religious building?
5. Which home to the Bishops of Bath and Wells in Somerset is surrounded by a moat?
6. Which Bishop of St Davids was responsible for transforming the Bishop's Palace there during the fourteenth century?
7. At which episcopal castle did Queen Mary I and Philip of Spain hold their wedding breakfast in 1554?
8. Which saint's shrine helped make medieval Durham one of England's great centres of pilgrimage?
9. Which Bishop of Winchester, founder of Winchester College and New College, Oxford, refurbished Farnham Castle?
10. Which Protestant preacher was imprisoned and executed at St Andrews Castle in 1546?
11. What name was given to the territory over which the Bishops of Durham exercised their exceptional secular authority?
12. Which bishop added the walls, towers and moat that give the Bishop's Palace at Wells much of its fortified appearance?
13. Which castle was ordered to be demolished by Henry II in 1155 following the disorder of the Anarchy?
14. Which Bishop of Durham accompanied Edward I on Scottish military action, later becoming Patriarch of Jerusalem?
15. Which Tudor Bishop of Winchester became Lord Chancellor and officiated at Mary I's marriage to Philip of Spain?
16. Which ruined episcopal residence stands immediately beside Winchester Cathedral?
17. At which Scottish castle can visitors see a mine and counter-mine dug by opposing sides during a 16th century siege?
18. Which nineteenth-century Bishop of Durham helped establish Durham University and was the last bishop to exercise the old palatine powers?
19. Which English Civil War Parliamentarian commander used Farnham Castle as a military base?
20. Which Act finally transferred the remaining secular powers of the Bishop of Durham to the Crown in 1836?

GALLERY: CASTLES & THE CHURCH



St Andrews Castle



Entrance to the Bishop's Palace, Wells



Durham Castle



Bishop's Palace, St Davids, Wales



Farnham Castle



THE PRINCE-BISHOPS OF DURHAM

A MIX OF SECULAR & RELIGIOUS POWER

For centuries, the Bishops of Durham occupied one of the most unusual positions in British history. They were senior churchmen, responsible for the spiritual life of their diocese, but they were also powerful secular rulers who governed much of north-east England in the name of the Crown.

From their great castle overlooking the River Wear, the Prince-Bishops exercised powers normally associated with kings and great feudal lords, an extraordinary arrangement born largely from Durham's position on England's turbulent northern frontier and one that survived, in various forms, for hundreds of years.

A DANGEROUS NORTHERN FRONTIER

The origins of the Prince-Bishops lie in the difficult years following the Norman Conquest, when northern England proved particularly troublesome for William the Conqueror to control: rebellions against Norman rule were frequent.

What's more, beyond the border lay an independent Scotland whose kings had their own ambitions in northern England.

Durham occupied a strategically important position in this uncertain landscape.

Already a great religious centre, its cathedral housed the shrine of St Cuthbert, one of northern England's most revered saints; at the same time, its location relatively close to the Scottish border gave the city considerable military importance.



Durham Cathedral

The Norman kings needed someone they could trust to maintain order, and the Bishops of Durham were well placed to perform that role. Unlike hereditary nobles, bishops could not establish permanent dynasties that might eventually challenge royal authority, while their position depended ultimately upon the Crown; they also possessed the wealth, education and administrative experience needed to govern a difficult frontier territory.

Over time, successive kings granted the bishops extensive privileges over a large area of northern England, known as the Palatinate of Durham, creating a remarkable hybrid of religious and secular government where churchmen exercised powers normally associated with a secular ruler.



Durham Castle with Cathedral in Background

A BISHOP WITH THE POWERS OF A PRINCE

Within the Palatinate, the Bishop of Durham possessed remarkably broad authority: he could administer justice, appoint officials, collect certain revenues and exercise considerable control over local government, while the bishops maintained their own courts and could raise forces when required for the defence of the north.

These were not merely ceremonial privileges. The Palatinate developed its own administrative institutions, and royal officials did not exercise the same direct authority there as they did across most of England.

In practical terms, Durham therefore operated with an unusual degree of independence while remaining firmly part of the English kingdom. The title “Prince-Bishop” reflects this extraordinary combination of spiritual and temporal authority, although it was not the normal formal title used by the medieval bishops themselves.

They remained Bishops of Durham, yet their political powers made them something considerably more than ordinary diocesan churchmen.

DURHAM CASTLE

Nothing symbolised this dual role more clearly than Durham Castle.

Standing on a rocky peninsula high above the River Wear, the castle faces Durham Cathedral across Palace Green, a striking arrangement even today but one that in the Middle Ages must have provided an unmistakable demonstration of authority: cathedral and castle facing one another, representing the spiritual and secular worlds over which the bishop presided.

Established by the Normans in the eleventh century, the castle became the principal residence of the bishops and gradually developed into much more than a defensive stronghold. Successive occupants transformed it into an impressive residence appropriate to some of the most powerful churchmen in England.

DEFENDING THE NORTH

Their military responsibilities were very real. Anglo-Scottish warfare repeatedly brought armies into northern England, and Durham lay within a region frequently affected by raids, invasions and military campaigns.

One of the most dramatic examples came in 1346 when, with Edward III campaigning in France during the Hundred Years' War, David II of Scotland led a major invasion into northern England. An English army was hastily assembled to confront him near Durham and, at the resulting Battle of Neville's Cross, the Scots suffered a decisive defeat: David himself was captured and remained a prisoner in England for more than a decade.



Battle of Neville's Cross

Events such as these demonstrated exactly why northern England needed strong local institutions capable of responding quickly to military threats.

The Prince-Bishops were not simply wealthy churchmen enjoying unusual privileges.

Their secular powers had developed partly because the Crown needed effective government in a region where an invading army might appear with relatively little warning.

POWER, WEALTH AND INFLUENCE

Some Bishops of Durham became major figures far beyond their own territories, serving kings as ministers and diplomats while accumulating considerable wealth from the extensive lands attached to the bishopric.

One of the most remarkable was Antony Bek, Bishop of Durham from 1284 to 1311. Bek was no retiring churchman. A soldier, diplomat and close servant of Edward I, he accompanied the king on campaigns in Scotland and became one of the most powerful men of his generation, enjoying wealth and a lifestyle on a scale more usually associated with the greatest secular magnates; he eventually also became Patriarch of Jerusalem.

Another important figure was Thomas Hatfield, bishop from 1345 to 1381, whose long episcopate coincided with the reign of Edward III, the Hundred Years' War and the Black Death, and whose impressive tomb can still be seen in Durham Cathedral.

Such men moved easily between the worlds of religion, royal government and aristocratic society, advising kings, administering enormous estates, conducting diplomacy and overseeing the spiritual affairs of their dioceses. Responsibilities that appear remarkably diverse today sat much more comfortably together in the medieval world.

Their wealth was reflected not only at Durham Castle but in a network of residences and estates across northern England, while the bishops' influence reached deep into the political, economic and social life of the region.



Bishop Thomas Hatfield's Tomb

CHURCHMEN AND FEUDAL LORDS

To modern eyes, there may seem to be something contradictory about a bishop exercising military and judicial authority. Medieval society saw things rather differently. Senior churchmen routinely advised monarchs, administered estates and held important offices of state; many came from aristocratic or politically connected families and, crucially, they were among the best-educated administrators available to medieval kings. The Church was not separate from government in anything like the modern sense.

A bishop could therefore be a spiritual leader while simultaneously managing estates, dispensing justice and advising a king on matters of war or diplomacy, moving between religious and secular responsibilities in a way that would appear strange today.

Durham was exceptional not because its bishops participated in government, but because the extent of their territorial authority was so great: few English bishops enjoyed anything approaching the independence exercised within the Durham Palatinate.

THE END OF THE PRINCE-BISHOPS

The system could not last indefinitely.

As the English state grew stronger and the Anglo-Scottish border gradually became more stable, the special arrangements that had once made Durham so useful to the Crown became less necessary, while central government increasingly extended its authority into areas that had previously enjoyed considerable independence.

A major change came during the reign of Henry VIII, when legislation in the 1530s curtailed some of the independent judicial powers of England's great palatine jurisdictions.

Durham nevertheless retained important privileges long afterwards; indeed, the Prince-Bishops survived the Reformation and continued to exercise secular authority for another three centuries.

Their final powers lasted until the nineteenth century. The decisive change came with the Durham (County Palatine) Act of 1836, which transferred the remaining secular powers of the Bishop of Durham to the Crown.



Durham Cathedral



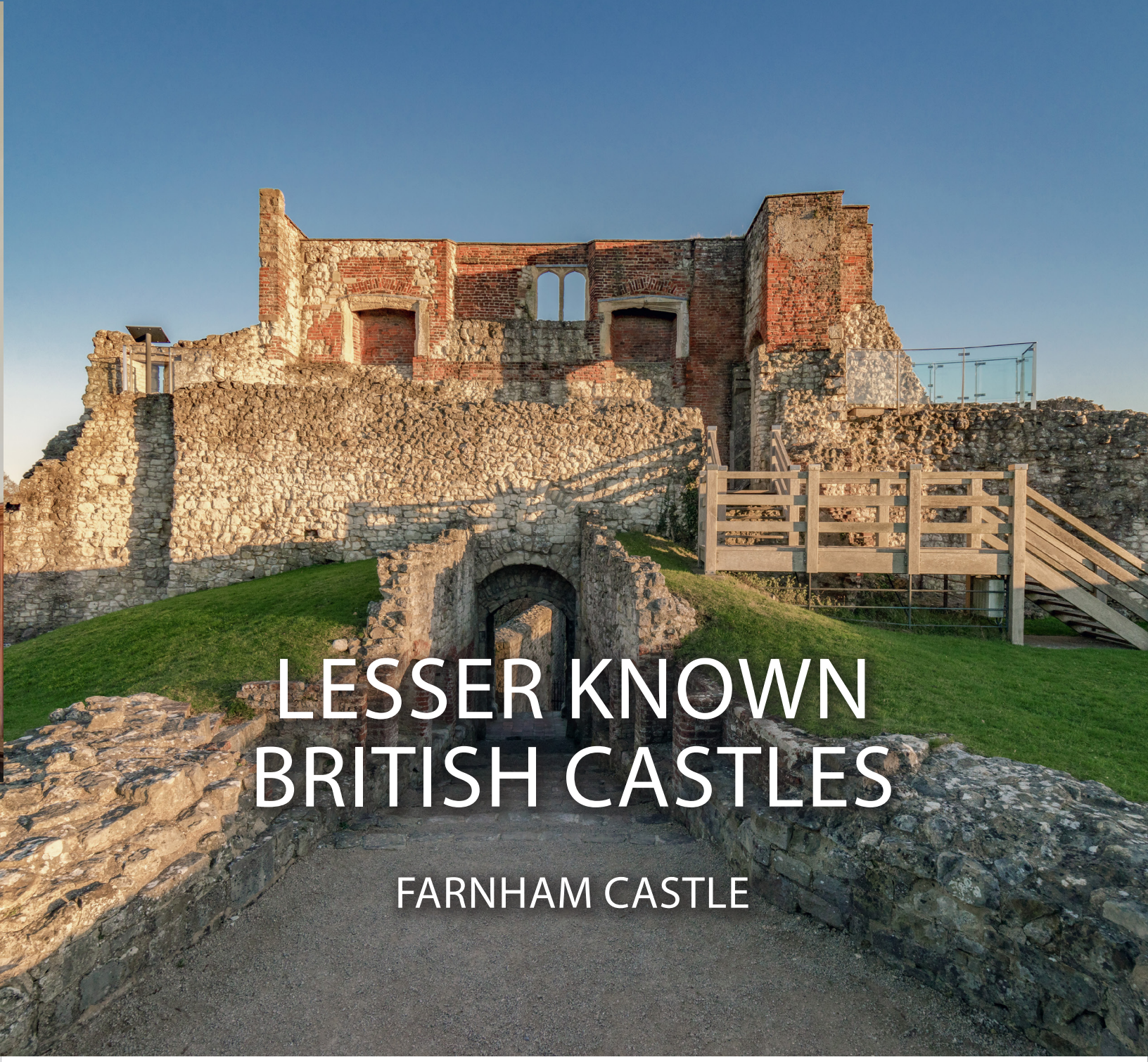
Great Hall, Durham Castle

UNIVERSITY

Durham Castle itself was already beginning a very different chapter. Bishop William Van Mildert, the last bishop to exercise the old palatine powers, played an important role in the foundation of Durham University in 1832, and the castle subsequently became the home of University College, a role it retains today.

About 100 lucky students a year get to stay at the castle - it's part of one of the University colleges - enjoying dinner in the same Great Hall as Prince-Bishops hundreds of years ago. This history is reflected in the name of the university student newspaper: Palatinate.

Quiz Answers: *1. Henry of Blois; 2. Durham Castle; 3. St Andrews Castle; 4. St Davids Cathedral; 5. The Bishop's Palace, Wells; 6. Henry de Gower; 7. Wolvesey Castle; 8. St Cuthbert; 9. William of Wykeham; 10. George Wishart; 11. The Palatinate of Durham; 12. Ralph of Shrewsbury; 13. Farnham Castle; 14. Antony Bek; 15. Stephen Gardiner; 16. Wolvesey Castle; 17. St Andrews Castle; 18. William Van Mildert; 19. Sir William Waller; 20. The Durham (County Palatine) Act 1836.*



LESSER KNOWN BRITISH CASTLES

FARNHAM CASTLE

High above the Surrey town of Farnham stands one of England's most unusual castles. For more than 800 years, Farnham Castle was associated with the Bishops of Winchester, powerful churchmen whose influence extended far beyond religious affairs, advising kings, owning great estates and playing important roles in national politics. Farnham provided them with both an impressive residence and a strategically placed stopping point between Winchester and London.

Unlike many episcopal palaces, however, Farnham was also unmistakably a castle. Its medieval remains include a motte, shell keep and defensive walls, while later buildings reveal its gradual transformation into a comfortable residence. Fortress and palace existed side by side.

HENRY OF BLOIS

The story of Farnham Castle begins in the first half of the twelfth century with one of medieval England's most powerful churchmen: Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester. Henry was the grandson of William the Conqueror and younger brother of King Stephen, connections that placed him close to the centre of English politics.

Appointed Bishop of Winchester in 1129, he combined enormous ecclesiastical wealth with considerable political ambition and became an influential figure during the Anarchy, the civil war between Stephen and Matilda.


Henry of Blois

It was Henry who established Farnham Castle, probably in the 1130s, choosing a commanding position overlooking the surrounding countryside. The first fortification appears to have consisted largely of earthworks and timber defences, although these were soon developed into something more substantial.

Henry was an enthusiastic castle builder. As well as Farnham, he carried out major work at Wolvesey, his palace beside Winchester Cathedral, and his building projects reflected the unusual position occupied by wealthy medieval bishops. A great churchman required residences from which to administer his estates and entertain important guests, while a politically powerful one might also need somewhere that could be defended. Farnham provided both.

A CASTLE CAUGHT IN THE ANARCHY

Henry's close involvement in the struggle between Stephen and Matilda inevitably brought his castles into the conflict. The Anarchy was a period in which royal authority weakened, rival nobles fortified their estates and castles became essential instruments of political and military power; with the accession of Henry II in 1154, however, the new king was determined to restore royal authority after years of disorder.

Farnham was among the castles affected. In 1155, Henry II ordered it to be demolished. The destruction was not permanent. Farnham's importance to the Bishops of Winchester ensured that the site was rebuilt, and by the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries it had once again become a substantial episcopal residence, combining the security of a castle with the accommodation required by one of England's wealthiest bishoprics.

The surviving shell keep dates largely from this period. Rather than taking the form of a conventional rectangular tower, it consists of a roughly circular stone wall enclosing the summit of the motte, an unusual arrangement that remains one of Farnham's most distinctive medieval features.

BETWEEN WINCHESTER AND LONDON

Location was one of the principal reasons for Farnham's longevity. The Bishops of Winchester controlled a wealthy and extensive diocese, but they were also frequent participants in royal government and needed to travel regularly between Winchester and the royal court, increasingly centred on London and Westminster. Farnham lay conveniently between the two.

As a result, the castle became much more than a defensive stronghold, providing somewhere for bishops to stay while travelling, conduct business, administer their estates and entertain guests. Over the centuries its domestic buildings were expanded and improved, giving successive occupants the degree of comfort expected by senior churchmen accustomed to moving in royal circles.

Kings came too. King John visited Farnham on numerous occasions during the early thirteenth century, while Henry III also stayed at the castle. Such royal visits demonstrate the status of the Bishops of Winchester, who were not simply provincial clerics but some of the most important political figures in medieval England.

THE BISHOPS OF WINCHESTER

The medieval Diocese of Winchester was exceptionally wealthy, and several of its bishops became leading figures in royal government. Among the most famous was William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester from 1366 to 1404. A skilled administrator and builder who served as Chancellor of England and founded both Winchester College and New College, Oxford, Wykeham carried out improvements at Farnham as part of the castle's gradual development from medieval fortress into high-status residence.

Later came Cardinal Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester during the early fifteenth century and one of the richest and most politically influential men in England.

By this period, Farnham's military role was becoming less important. Its walls and keep still proclaimed power and provided security, but comfortable halls, chambers and service buildings increasingly mattered more than formidable defences. The castle was changing.



William of Wykeham's Effigy - Winchester Cathedral



Winchester Cathedral

REFORMATION AND CHANGE

The sixteenth century transformed the English Church, yet Farnham Castle retained its connection with the Bishops of Winchester throughout the upheavals of the Reformation.

One of its most notable Tudor occupants was Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester and a major political figure during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary I.

Gardiner became Lord Chancellor and officiated at Mary's marriage to Philip of Spain at Winchester Cathedral the following year. Once again, a Bishop of Winchester was operating at the centre of national affairs. Farnham itself was changing too.

Like many medieval fortresses, it increasingly served as a comfortable residence rather than a place intended primarily for war, although the ancient keep and defences remained as reminders of its earlier purpose.

CIVIL WAR

War returned to Farnham in the seventeenth century. Surrey lay between London and the south coast, making control of important routes through the county strategically useful during the English Civil War. Farnham Castle was initially held for Parliament, but in 1642 Royalist forces briefly occupied it before withdrawing as Parliamentarian troops approached.

The castle subsequently became an important Parliamentarian base under Sir William Waller, one of Parliament's leading commanders in southern England, whose position at Farnham allowed his forces to operate across Surrey, Hampshire and the surrounding counties. Its renewed military role did not last.

As happened at many castles during and after the Civil War, Farnham's defences were deliberately damaged to reduce their future usefulness, with the keep slighted so that it could no longer function effectively as a fortress. The residential buildings survived. Eventually, the bishops returned.

FROM FORTRESS TO PALACE

Following the restoration of the monarchy and episcopacy in 1660, Farnham resumed its role as a residence of the Bishops of Winchester. By then, however, the age of the medieval castle was over, and successive bishops altered and modernised the domestic ranges to meet very different expectations of comfort and status. The result was an unusual architectural mixture. Georgian windows and comfortable rooms appeared alongside medieval masonry, while the ruined shell keep remained above them as an obvious reminder of the site's much earlier defensive role.

This gradual evolution is one of Farnham's most interesting characteristics: it was never completely rebuilt as a fashionable country house, but neither was it simply abandoned and allowed to become a ruin. Instead, generations of bishops continued to adapt the ancient site to their own needs, preserving parts while transforming others.

The connection endured into modern times. Farnham remained an episcopal residence until the twentieth century, bringing to an end an association between the Bishops of Winchester and the castle that had lasted for more than eight centuries.

A CASTLE AND A BISHOP'S PALACE

Farnham Castle provides an unusually clear illustration of the close relationship between the medieval Church and secular power. Its first great builder, Henry of Blois, was simultaneously bishop, royal prince and political operator; later occupants included chancellors, royal advisers and some of the wealthiest churchmen in England. Its architecture reflects that long history.

The motte and shell keep belong to a world in which even a bishop might require a defensible stronghold, while the later halls and residential ranges reflect the increasing importance of comfort, hospitality and status as Farnham's military role declined.

That mixture makes Farnham particularly appropriate to the story of castles and the Church.

It was an episcopal palace, certainly, but its origins, defences and involvement in two periods of civil conflict leave little doubt that it was also a castle – one occupied for centuries by churchmen whose influence extended far beyond the walls of their cathedrals.



Farnham Castle from the Air



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