

British Castles

September 2026



Life Inside a Medieval Castle
Everyday Life Behind the Walls



EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

Welcome to the September 2026 issue of British Castles Magazine, which has a 'Life Inside a Medieval Castle' theme.

Castles are usually associated with battles, sieges and the people who ruled from them. This month, we're looking instead at what happened when there wasn't a battle going on - which, for most castles, was most of the time.

Our main feature explores everyday life behind the walls, from food and sleeping arrangements to entertainment, hygiene and the surprisingly complicated business of keeping a large medieval household running.

We then meet some of the people who made it all possible: stewards, constables, cooks, clerks, grooms, craftsmen and the many servants whose work rarely makes it into traditional castle histories.

Our quiz is on the running of castles, while the gallery features some of the many impressive castle interiors across the country.

Finally, we visit Stokesay Castle in Shropshire. Built by the wealthy wool merchant Laurence of Ludlow, it is a particularly fitting castle for this issue because it was created as much as a comfortable and impressive home as a fortress.

I hope you enjoy this glimpse of life behind the battlements.

Chris, Editor



LIFE INSIDE A MEDIEVAL CASTLE

Castles dominate our view of the Middle Ages. We picture towers, battlements, knights and sieges, but for the people who actually occupied them, castles were something much more ordinary: they were home. Admittedly, they were unusual homes. A substantial medieval castle might accommodate the lord and his family alongside knights, officials, clerks, priests, cooks, servants, guards and visiting guests. Food had to be prepared, horses cared for, accounts maintained and buildings repaired. Fires needed tending and water had to be carried.

Meanwhile, the lord's estates had to be administered and everyone, from senior officials to kitchen boys, had a place within an elaborate household hierarchy. Most importantly, castles were not permanently preparing for attack. Months or years might pass without serious military danger. On an ordinary day, the sounds coming from inside the walls were more likely to be chopping wood, clattering cooking pots and horses in the courtyard than swords striking shields.

THE CASTLE HOUSEHOLD

At the top of the household stood the lord and his family. A powerful noble might own several castles and estates and travel between them, taking part of his household with him. Medieval castles could therefore alternate between periods of intense activity and relative quiet.

When the lord was present, the castle became the centre of his world. Here he received visitors, conducted business, heard reports from his estates and entertained people whose friendship or loyalty mattered. His wife might have considerable responsibilities of her own, particularly when her husband was absent, overseeing aspects of the household and estates and sometimes assuming responsibility for the castle itself.

Below them existed an extensive hierarchy. Senior officials such as the steward, chamberlain and constable could wield considerable authority, while chaplains and clerks dealt with worship and written business. Then came the cooks, grooms, guards, craftsmen and domestic servants who performed the work required to keep the household functioning. The size of that household varied enormously. A small castle might contain only a few dozen people, while a major royal or aristocratic residence could become crowded with hundreds when the owner and his entourage arrived.



Great Hall, Dover Castle

MORNING BEHIND THE WALLS

The medieval day began early. As daylight appeared, servants rekindled fires, fetched water and began preparing food. Stable workers attended to the horses, while guards changed duties and kitchen staff faced another day's formidable task of feeding the household.

Religion also shaped the rhythm of life. Important castles generally possessed a chapel, sometimes surprisingly elaborate, where the lord, family and members of the household could attend Mass.

Clergymen might also serve as secretaries or advisers, since literacy remained particularly valuable in a world in which much administrative work was conducted by people connected with the Church.

Breakfast was not necessarily the substantial meal we expect today. Depending upon period and status, people might eat bread and drink ale, or simply wait for the first major meal of the day. Then work began – although for many inhabitants it had started long before their employers were awake.

A CASTLE WAS A WORKPLACE

A castle was not simply somewhere to sleep and eat. It could also be the administrative centre of a large estate. Rents had to be collected, expenditure recorded and supplies purchased. Tenants might arrive on business. Messengers came and went carrying letters and instructions, while disputes and legal matters could require attention. Stores of grain, wine, timber and other goods needed careful management.

This produced a surprisingly bureaucratic side to castle life. Medieval aristocratic households generated accounts, inventories and correspondence, some of which survive and provide historians with wonderfully mundane details about purchases ranging from spices and candles to horseshoes.

There was constant physical work too. A large castle required maintenance. Roofs leaked, walls needed repair, drains had to be cleared and timber structures deteriorated. Blacksmiths maintained metalwork and equipment, carpenters dealt with woodwork, while labourers performed the less glamorous jobs that kept the whole complex usable. Behind the imposing stone walls was a busy working community.

FOOD AND THE GREAT HALL

For much of the Middle Ages, the great hall was the social heart of the castle. This was where the household gathered for major meals, where visitors could be received and where entertainment and formal business took place. The lord and important guests occupied the prestigious upper end of the hall, usually on a raised dais, while other members of the household sat according to status. Meals made hierarchy visible.

The wealthy medieval diet could be remarkably varied. Meat might include beef, pork, mutton, venison and game birds, while fish was particularly important on the numerous days when the Church restricted the eating of meat. Bread was fundamental, as were pottages and other dishes based on grains, vegetables and pulses. Wealthier households could obtain imported spices, dried fruits and wine, while ale was consumed widely.

Producing all this required a substantial operation. Castle kitchens could be hot, smoky and extremely busy, particularly when large numbers of guests were being entertained. Meat might be roasted before an open fire, while large cauldrons were used for boiling and stewing. Bread could be produced in ovens and food stored in specialised rooms. The pantry was associated with bread; the buttery with drink. Storerooms, cellars and larders held provisions. A feast could be spectacular, but it would be misleading to imagine every castle meal as a banquet overflowing with peacocks and venison. Ordinary household life was considerably more routine. Even medieval nobles did not feast every night.

WAS CASTLE LIFE COMFORTABLE?

By modern standards, even a luxurious medieval castle could be uncomfortable. Early stone castles were particularly difficult to heat. Thick walls and small windows helped with defence but did little to create a light, cosy interior, and large rooms could be draughty. Fires provided warmth, initially from open hearths and increasingly from fireplaces built into walls, but heating an entire castle was impossible.

The wealthiest inhabitants therefore created comfort in other ways. Wall hangings and tapestries helped reduce draughts while also adding colour to otherwise bare interiors. Floors might be covered with rushes or other materials, and better furniture could be moved with the household from residence to residence.

Private chambers became increasingly important as the Middle Ages progressed. The lord and lady did not necessarily spend their entire lives in the great hall; they could withdraw to more comfortable rooms, often known as chambers or solars, away from the bustle of the household.

Beds were valuable possessions. A wealthy person's bed might have curtains, fine textiles, mattresses and blankets and could be far more comfortable than the simple sleeping arrangements available to servants. Privacy itself was a luxury.





Castle Latrines

KEEPING CLEAN

One of the most persistent myths about the Middle Ages is that nobody washed. Medieval standards of hygiene were certainly very different from ours, but people understood the desirability of washing. Hands were commonly washed before meals, and basins and jugs allowed people to wash without anything resembling a modern bathroom. Wealthy castle inhabitants could bathe in wooden tubs filled with heated water, although preparing one required servants to carry a great deal of water.

Laundry was another major task. Linen worn next to the skin could be washed more readily than heavy outer garments, and maintaining clothing and household textiles required considerable labour.

Then there were the toilets. Castles frequently contained garderobes: small latrine chambers constructed so that waste dropped down a shaft, into a pit or, in some cases, outside the walls. They were practical rather than pleasant, and keeping waste away from living areas was an ongoing problem. Water was even more important. Wells and cisterns could supply a castle, and ensuring access to water was essential not only for everyday life but also for survival during a siege.

ENTERTAINMENT AND LEISURE

Castle life was not all administration and work. Hunting and hawking were important aristocratic pursuits, combining entertainment with displays of status and skill. Men and women could participate in hawking, while hunting expeditions provided opportunities for socialising as well as supplying game.

Indoors there were board games, dice, music and storytelling. Travelling musicians and other entertainers might perform for the household, particularly during important celebrations. Religious festivals, weddings and visits from guests could transform the normal routine into days of feasting and entertainment.

Children had their own education and recreation. Noble boys might learn riding and martial skills as they grew older, while girls from aristocratic households were educated in the accomplishments and responsibilities expected of women of their rank. Both could be taught religion, manners and the complicated social conventions of the world into which they had been born.



Medieval Castle Entertainment

WHEN DARKNESS FELL

The castle changed after sunset. Artificial light was expensive and limited. Candles, rushlights and lamps allowed activity to continue, but there was nothing approaching modern illumination. Rooms beyond the immediate glow of a flame quickly disappeared into darkness.

Security also became more obvious. Gates could be closed and barred, while guards continued their watches. In dangerous periods, access to the castle might be carefully controlled, although on an ordinary night the principal concern was maintaining routine security rather than expecting an army to appear before breakfast.



Bed Chamber, Dover Castle

Sleeping arrangements reflected status just as clearly as dining arrangements did. The lord and lady might enjoy private chambers, but many servants and retainers had far less privacy. Some slept in shared rooms, service areas or wherever suitable space could be found. A castle containing a large household was rarely a quiet place. Then, with the next daylight, the whole process began again.

MORE HOME THAN FORTRESS

It is easy to look at a ruined castle today and see only its military architecture. Gatehouses, arrow loops, towers and battlements survive particularly well, while wooden furniture, textiles, cooking equipment and the people themselves have disappeared. That can distort our impression of what castles were actually for. Certainly, defence mattered. A castle might protect its occupants during rebellion or invasion, house soldiers and dominate the surrounding territory.

Some endured terrifying sieges in which ordinary domestic routines gave way to overcrowding, rationing and danger. But those were exceptional periods. For most of its working life, a medieval castle was filled not with battle but with everyday activity. Meals were prepared. Accounts were checked. Children grew up. Servants carried water, grooms tended horses and clerks wrote letters.



Lords entertained guests, prayed in their chapels and worried about income from their estates. The castle was a fortress when circumstances demanded it.

The rest of the time, it was something more complicated and perhaps more interesting: a home, workplace and community contained in the same walls.



QUIZ: LIFE IN A MEDIEVAL CASTLE

Test your knowledge of the life of a medieval castle. Answers on page 20.

1. Which household official was responsible for overseeing a lord's estates, accounts and household administration?
2. What was the principal function of a castle constable?
3. Which household officer supervised the lord's private chamber and personal household?
4. What was the name of the official traditionally responsible for bread and the pantry?
5. Which household officer was originally responsible particularly for wine and other drink?
6. What was a garderobe in a medieval castle?
7. What was the solar used for in many medieval castles?
8. Why were clerks particularly valuable members of a medieval castle household?
9. What was the great hall's main role in everyday castle life?
10. Which skilled craftsman was responsible for shoeing and caring for horses' hooves?
11. What was the raised platform at the upper end of a great hall, where the lord and important guests might sit, called?
12. What was a larder primarily used for?
13. Which household member would celebrate Mass in the chapel and perhaps also serve as secretary, adviser or tutor?
14. What was the main responsibility of a castle porter?
15. Why might the number of people living in a medieval castle change dramatically during the year?
16. What were rushlights, commonly used in medieval households?
17. Which craftsmen were particularly important for repairing roofs, floors, doors and other wooden parts of a castle?
18. What was the purpose of a castle cistern?
19. Which room or department of a wealthy medieval household could be responsible for valuable clothing and textiles as well as other possessions and sometimes financial administration?
20. Why might tapestries and other textile wall hangings have been useful in castle chambers as well as decorative?

GALLERY: INSIDE BRITAIN'S CASTLES



Cardiff Castle



Warwick Castle



Doune Castle



St George's Hall Roof, Windsor Castle



Stirling Castle



WHO KEPT THE CASTLE RUNNING?

KEY MEDIEVAL CASTLE ROLES

Behind every medieval lord, knight and great hall stood a much larger group of people whose names rarely appear in chronicles. They cooked meals, looked after horses, kept accounts, guarded gates, repaired buildings, carried messages and ensured that fires were burning when the household woke each morning. Without them, castle life would quickly have ground to a halt.

A large medieval castle was both a home and a workplace, and its household could contain dozens or even hundreds of people. At the top were senior officials who might themselves come from prosperous families; further down were skilled craftsmen, cooks, grooms, guards and servants performing the endless practical jobs required by a great household.

Not everyone lived permanently within the walls, nor did every castle employ the same officials. Nevertheless, surviving records allow us to reconstruct something of the complicated organisation behind castle life – and to meet the people who made it possible.

THE STEWARD – HOUSEHOLD & STAFF MANAGER

Among the most important officials was the steward.

In a great aristocratic household, this could be a position of considerable responsibility, involving supervision of household affairs, estates, expenditure and other officials rather than simply the management of domestic servants.

A powerful lord might own estates scattered across several counties and possess numerous residences, creating an administrative operation far larger than the castle itself.

Rents had to be collected, agricultural estates managed and supplies purchased, while the lord might spend much of the year travelling between properties.

The steward helped ensure that this complicated machine continued to operate, overseeing accounts, supervising other officers and dealing with estate business on his master's behalf.

In a sufficiently important household, the position brought considerable influence. It also required discretion. Stewards were almost always male, and their privileged position made them keepers of both professional and personal secrets.



THE CONSTABLE – CASTLE KEEPER

The constable was particularly associated with the castle itself. He might be responsible for security, the garrison and the maintenance of the defences; when the owner was absent, as medieval lords frequently were, the constable could effectively have charge of the fortress.

This became especially important during periods of instability. Weapons and provisions had to be available, guards organised and defences inspected. If a siege threatened, the constable's responsibilities suddenly became matters of life and death.

Most days were less dramatic. Gates still needed guarding, visitors had to be admitted and the routine business of maintaining a fortified building continued.



THE CHAMBERLAIN – KEY ADVISOR

The chamberlain worked much closer to the private life of the lord. As private apartments became increasingly important, allowing aristocratic families to withdraw from the public world of the great hall, the chamberlain supervised this more personal part of the household.

That proximity could bring influence. Medieval politics depended heavily upon personal relationships, and someone who often entered the lord's private chambers was well placed to speak to him directly.

Beneath the chamberlain were servants responsible for beds, clothing and personal possessions. A wealthy lord's wardrobe could itself become an administrative department, responsible not simply for clothes but for valuable textiles and sometimes money and records.

CLERKS AND CHAPLAINS

Medieval households also required people who could read, write and keep records. Clerks prepared correspondence, recorded expenditure and dealt with the paperwork generated by estates and household administration, skills that were particularly valuable in a society where literacy was far from universal.

Chaplains had an obvious religious role, celebrating Mass and ministering to the household, but religious and administrative work could overlap. An educated cleric might also serve as secretary, adviser or tutor.

For a talented young clerk, household service could provide opportunities for advancement. Medieval government was filled with churchmen with literacy and administrative ability.

THE KITCHEN ARMY

Then there were the people responsible for feeding everyone. In a large castle this was a formidable operation, with cooks and assistants preparing meat and fish, stirring pots, carrying fuel and washing equipment. On feast days or when important guests arrived, the kitchen might be expected to produce numerous dishes for hundreds of diners.

Several household offices had responsibilities that now sound rather mysterious. The pantler looked after bread and the pantry, while the butler was originally associated particularly with wine and other drink – indeed, the word itself derives from the bottle.

Food also had to arrive before it could be cooked. Buyers, carters and estate officials ensured that grain, livestock, fish, wine, ale and other provisions reached the castle, some produced on the lord's estates and others purchased locally or brought considerable distances. Feeding a castle began far beyond the kitchen walls.



Castle Stables

GROOMS, HORSES AND THE STABLE

A medieval aristocratic household depended heavily upon horses.

They carried people and messages, pulled carts and allowed nobles to hunt and travel between their estates; warhorses had an obvious military importance, while less glamorous animals performed the everyday work of transport.

Grooms fed, watered and cleaned them, farriers dealt with hooves and horseshoes, and saddles and harnesses required skilled maintenance.

The stable could therefore be one of the busiest parts of the castle complex, particularly when a large household was preparing to move.

Medieval nobles were remarkably mobile. Their arrival with family, servants, possessions and horses could transform a relatively quiet castle almost overnight.

GUARDS AND MEN-AT-ARMS

Despite all this domestic activity, a castle remained a fortified building. Porters controlled access through the gate, guards watched entrances and vulnerable points, while larger castles might maintain a permanent military presence.

The size of the garrison depended heavily upon circumstances. In peacetime, surprisingly few soldiers might be required; when war threatened, additional men could be recruited, provisions accumulated and the fortress prepared for defence. For most castle guards, fortunately, service involved rather more watching and waiting than heroic combat.

CRAFTSMEN AND CONSTANT REPAIRS

Castles also required almost continuous maintenance. Roofs leaked, timber rotted, windows broke, gates needed attention and drainage systems became blocked. Carpenters repaired roofs, floors and wooden structures; masons maintained stonework; blacksmiths produced and repaired iron fittings, tools and equipment.

Some craftsmen belonged to the household, while others were hired when needed, and major building campaigns could bring large numbers of specialist workers to a castle. Their work reminds us that medieval castles did not simply appear in finished form and remain unchanged.

They were continually being repaired, altered and modernised.



Building a Medieval Castle



Beaumaris Castle Gatehouse

THE SERVANTS WE RARELY HEAR ABOUT

At the lower end of the household hierarchy were the people performing the most repetitive jobs. Water had to be fetched, fires supplied with fuel, floors cleaned and chambers prepared; bedding and clothing needed attention, messages were carried and possessions moved.

Laundry alone involved considerable labour, particularly without running water, and some of this work might be performed outside the castle by specialist laundresses.

Young people often entered service as part of growing up, receiving food, accommodation, experience and sometimes wages. Nor was every servant poor: household service encompassed a broad social range, from low-paid labourers to senior officers who were themselves gentlemen.

The hierarchy was unmistakable, however. Where you ate, slept and spent your working day depended heavily upon rank.

WHERE DID EVERYONE SLEEP?

Finding space for a large household could be difficult. The lord and lady occupied the best chambers, important guests needed suitable accommodation and senior officials might have rooms of their own.

Further down the hierarchy, privacy diminished rapidly. Servants and retainers could sleep in shared chambers, service buildings and whatever other suitable spaces were available. Nor was the population fixed.

When the lord was away, only a relatively small group might remain to maintain and guard the property; his return with family, officials, servants and guests could suddenly fill the castle with people.

The walls stayed still. The household moved.



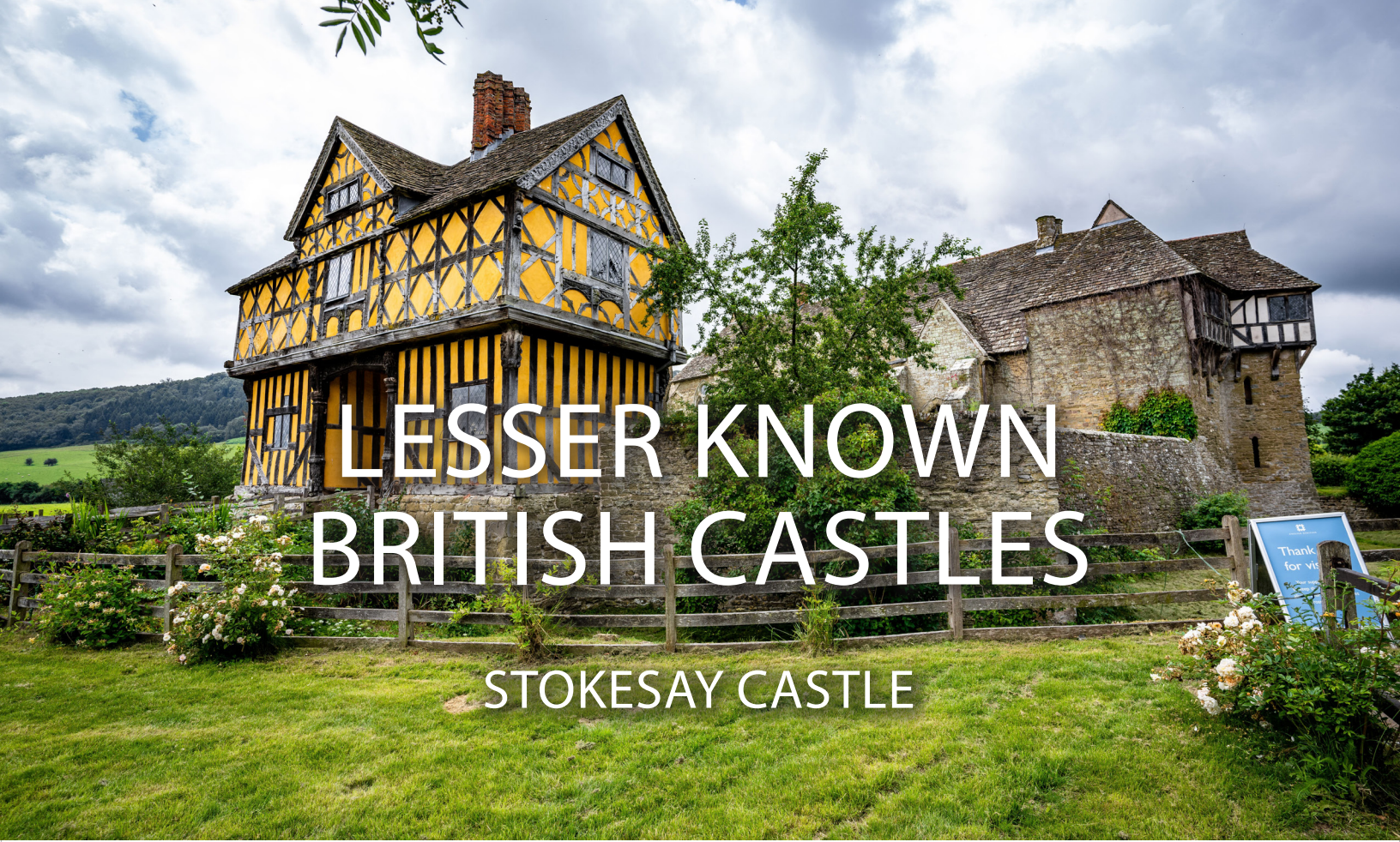
Bedroom, Appleby Castle

A COMMUNITY BEHIND THE WALLS

Kings and nobles dominate castle history, yet they represented only a fraction of the people who actually experienced life within the walls. Every formal dinner depended upon cooks and servants. Every journey required horses and grooms. Every comfortable chamber needed someone to light its fire and prepare its bedding, while every gatehouse required people to open, close and guard it. Behind the lord administering his estates stood clerks and officials recording the details.

The result was a community organised around service, rank and responsibility, in which an aristocratic family occupied the summit but depended upon a much larger group beneath it. Some held influential offices and could rise considerably through their master's service; others spent their days performing hard physical work that attracted little notice. Their names are mostly forgotten. Without the stewards, clerks, cooks, grooms, guards, craftsmen and servants who kept the household functioning, however, the great medieval castle could never have operated at all.

Quiz Answers: 1. The steward; 2. Overseeing the castle, particularly its security; 3. The chamberlain; 4. The pantler; 5. The butler; 6. A latrine or toilet; 7. As a private living or sleeping chamber, usually for the lord and his family; 8. They could read, write and prepare accounts, records and correspondence; 9. It was the principal communal space for dining, receiving guests, business and entertainment; 10. A farrier; 11. The dais; 12. Storing food; 13. The chaplain; 14. Controlling access through the castle gate; 15. Lords frequently travelled between their estates with large households and entourages; 16. Simple lights made from rushes dipped in fat or grease; 17. Carpenters; 18. Collecting and storing water; 19. The wardrobe; 20. They could help reduce draughts



LESSER KNOWN BRITISH CASTLES

STOKESAY CASTLE

Stokesay Castle is an unusual place. With its stone towers, battlements and fortified appearance, it looks every inch the medieval castle, yet it was built primarily not for warfare but for comfortable living. Hidden in the Shropshire countryside near the Welsh border, Stokesay provides a remarkably complete example of the sort of home a wealthy medieval family could create at the end of the thirteenth century.

Its builder was not a great baron or famous knight. He was Laurence of Ludlow, a prosperous wool merchant who had made his fortune from one of medieval England's most valuable commodities.

A MERCHANT'S CASTLE

Laurence acquired the manor of Stokesay in 1281, at a time when the wool trade was bringing considerable wealth to merchants who could supply the flourishing textile industries of England and continental Europe. He prospered spectacularly. With wealth came status, and Laurence set about creating a residence to match his position. In 1291 he received permission from Edward I to fortify his home – the royal “licence to crenellate” that allowed an owner to add defensive features such as battlements. What emerged was a fascinating mixture of manor house and castle.

Stokesay had strong stone buildings and towers, but its defences were relatively modest. This was not another Caernarfon or Harlech, designed to withstand determined armies. Security mattered, particularly in a region that had experienced conflict, but so did prestige. Stokesay announced that its owner had arrived.

THE GREAT HALL

The heart of the medieval household was the great hall, and Stokesay's is one of its greatest treasures.

Built in the late thirteenth century, the hall survives to an extraordinary degree, including its magnificent timber roof. It is easy to imagine this as the busiest part of Laurence's household: servants moving between the kitchen and tables, visitors arriving on business and members of the household gathering for meals.

The hall was a public space. Here Laurence could entertain guests, conduct business and display his wealth and position, with seating reflecting the hierarchy of the household. At the upper end, the family and important visitors occupied the place of honour; servants and retainers sat further down.

It was dining room, reception room and workplace rolled into one.



Great Hall

PRIVACY AND COMFORT

Life in a wealthy medieval household was not entirely communal. At either end of Stokesay's hall were more private spaces where the family could escape its noise and activity. The north tower contained comfortable domestic rooms, while the distinctive south tower provided additional chambers. Fireplaces, windows and garderobes reveal that comfort was an important consideration. These were rooms intended to be lived in.

That distinction between the public hall and private chamber tells us much about changing aristocratic life during the later Middle Ages. Great halls remained important, but wealthy families increasingly valued spaces in which they could withdraw from the wider household.

Stokesay captures both worlds.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Of course, comfortable medieval life depended upon people working out of sight.

Food served in the hall had to be stored and prepared, fires required fuel, horses needed attention and water had to be carried. Servants maintained the chambers and bedding, while officials helped administer the estate that supported the household.

Stokesay was therefore more than Laurence's home. It was the centre of a working estate, surrounded by farmland and connected to the commercial world from which his wealth had come.

The surviving buildings inevitably emphasise Laurence and his family, but behind them stood the cooks, servants, grooms and labourers who made their lifestyle possible.

A CASTLE THAT ESCAPED DESTRUCTION

Laurence of Ludlow died in 1294, only a few years after receiving his licence to fortify Stokesay. The property subsequently passed through several families, but one reason it survives so well is that it largely escaped the destructive rebuilding experienced by many medieval residences.

It also avoided becoming a major military stronghold. During the English Civil War, Stokesay was surrendered to Parliamentary forces in 1645 without serious fighting. Consequently, it escaped the devastating siege damage suffered by numerous other castles.

Later owners made changes, most noticeably the timber-framed gatehouse dating from the seventeenth century, whose decorative appearance provides a striking contrast with the medieval stone buildings behind it.



Stokesay Castle



Stokesay Castle Gatehouse

A WINDOW INTO MEDIEVAL LIFE

Stokesay challenges our assumptions about what a castle had to be. Its towers and battlements provided protection and projected status, but its principal purpose was domestic. Laurence of Ludlow wanted somewhere secure and impressive in which to live, entertain and conduct his affairs.

That is precisely what makes Stokesay so valuable to the story of everyday castle life. Its great hall, private chambers and service spaces reveal a building created around the needs of a household rather than an army.

Many castles are remembered for battles, kings or dramatic sieges. Stokesay's story is quieter. And because so much of the medieval building survives, it offers something equally fascinating: a glimpse behind the battlements at how the wealthy actually lived.



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