

MEDIEVAL CASTLES

In medieval times, if you were an important person trying to stay safe, it wasn't enough just to lock your front door at night. No, you needed something bigger. You needed a castle.

Castles were rare in England before the Norman Conquest, but after it you couldn't move for them. The Normans built hundreds of wooden castles to protect themselves in their new lands, mostly to the classic motte and bailey design – the motte was a mound with a tower on it, and the bailey was the space surrounded by a wooden palisade – a fancy word for fence.



MAKING THE MOATS OF IT

Over the years, castles got stronger. They were rebuilt in stone, and their defences were improved with towers, gatehouses, drawbridges, arrow slits, moats, ditches, fighting platforms and tooth-shaped crenellated battlements.

During sieges, attackers would try to destroy the castle by any means necessary. They built big wooden siege towers to scale the walls, they tried to batter down the gates with rams, they fired rocks from trebuchets to try to break the walls, and they even 'undermined' the castle walls with tunnels. More often, though, they just waited and waited until the defenders ran out of food.

CASTLE SWEET CASTLE

Although castles had to be ready for war, most of the time they were at peace. They usually belonged to the king or to a powerful nobleman, and in some ways castles were like country houses. They could be luxurious places, with expensive furniture, colourful paintings, stained glass and rich tapestries. There'd be grand halls for eating and feasting, comfortable private apartments, chapels, huge kitchens and cellars filled with food and fine wines.

Their owners wouldn't live in just one castle, but they'd move between them, a bit like the queen does today. When they did, they'd bring loads of people with them - their family, servants, companions and soldiers. They'd carry their expensive furniture and decorations around with them too.

FOOLS AND HORSES

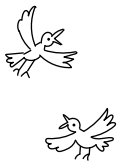
When Countess Joan deValance stayed at Goodrich Castle in 1296, she came with 50 horses and an entourage of nearly 200 people! Many of those people would have been servants, who did all sorts of jobs. There were cooks, butlers, grooms to look after horses, kitchen boys to do kitchen things and 'gong farmers' to clear up everyone's poo. At great feasts lords would lay on entertainment, so there'd be jesters, jugglers, acrobats, storytellers and musicians. The kind of thing on offer wasn't always particularly highbrow - Henry II had a jester named 'Roland the Musical Farter'...



YOU'VE RUINED IT!

The age of castles came to an end as gunpowder weapons became more and more powerful - tall stone walls couldn't stand up to cannonballs. And as England became more peaceful, wealthy people built comfortable houses rather than formidable fortresses, and they began to neglect their old castles.

But during the English Civil War of the 17th century, lots of medieval castles were called back into action, hundreds of years after they were built. Many were destroyed by artillery or even deliberately blown up after the war, which is why so many are in ruins today.



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