

Defining 'The Castle'

by Philip Davis (First written 2009: Last revised 1 October 2016)

By 1983, when David King's magnum opus *Castellarium Anglicanum* was published, castles studies was, in many ways, a completed subject. The castles was clearly defined as 'a fortified residence of a (feudal) lord'¹. The thorny question of the origin of the castle had been solved early in the 20th century by Mrs Armitage and R. H. Round, and G. T. Clark's proposal of a Saxon origin had been quashed under a Norman yolk^{1a}. The classic story of the development of the castle as a military fortification had been described by A. H. Thompson and popularised by R. A. Brown.² All that needed to be done was fill in the individual details of sites and wipe away the last remnants of the 19th centuries Liberals loathing of the private castle from the public memory.

In the wings of were a group of 'young turks', lead by Charles Coulson, about to challenge this orthodoxy. Coulson had published his seminal paper '[Structural Symbolism in Medieval Castle Architecture](#)' in 1979 which challenged this military view. Gradually, with some marked opposition, some still ongoing, a paradigm shift has occurred. This perhaps best seen in the revisionist views of Brown's 'perfect specimen of the ... quadrangular castle' (Brown, 1989, p. 35) [Bodiam Castle](#) (Turner, 1986; Coulson, 1991; Taylor *et al*, 1996). Later castles are no longer seen as military residences, but as houses of men concerned with displays of their social status. Coulson's work (Coulson, 1979, 1982, 1994, 1995) has shown [licences to crenellate](#) were not permissions by a controlling royal authority designed to restrict military buildings but desirable, but by no means essential, royal acknowledgements of social status with approval to show this status by building in a noble style. The later castle was no longer a Saracen armoured personal carrier but a Roll-Royce car with a generals



Clunġunford motte. Shropshire

pennant (indeed many licences to crenellate were for second-hand Jag's). In fact much of this apparent revolution in thought had been a part of the writing of earlier authors, notably Arnold Taylor's recognition of the symbolic architectural form of [Caernarfon Castle](#), but the new 'symbolists' pushed these arguments to the front of castle studies and, in doing so, had to push military deterministic thinking out of its previous dominate position.
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More recent work extends this view into earlier periods of the castles history. Examination of the numerous small mottes of the welsh marches can not justify earlier explanations of these as 'watch towers' or 'pill boxes'. A manor rated at half a knight's services clearly did not have the finances to mount a permanent watch and the actual site of these mottes is rarely military, some are overlooked by still strong Iron Age fortifications. The astonishing booklet *The Motte-and-Bailey Castles of the Welsh Border* by R. H. A. Merlen, which proposes garrisons of a hundred or more in such mottes can be seen a last desperate gasp of a dead idea. Here, in the welsh marches, it seems these minor earthworks used small 'symbolic' mottes to assert lordship in an area where even English, let alone Norman, rule were still open to active questioning. [Lucy Marten-Holden](#) (2001) looked at Suffolk and came to

the conclusion that castles there represented "the concept of dominion, not military domination", this view clearly had wider scope and others have expanded on this.

The concept of symbolism needs to be clear to understand this paradigm shift. For some, reluctant to accept this new revisionist thinking, a symbolic castle is the same as a sham castle. It is not. A symbol is a powerful message, and often difficult for people to accept as 'unreal'. Money is a symbol. The overt message that money symbolises is as a trustworthy representation of wealth. In most social situations money actually represents power and the man who insists on buying drinks in the pub is not being generous but attempting to hide his sense of inadequacy behind a power display. In most situations a personal firearm, particularly the hand gun, is a symbol. The farmers shotgun used to put rabbit on the table may seem to be a purely utilitarian tool and, it has been argued, that part of the meaning of the [2nd amendment to the US constitution](#) was about ensuring this simple activity was available to all but it seems hard to believe that the National Rifle Association is an organisation concerned with ensuring people have access to protein in their diet. The firearm is rife with symbolic values of prowess and control.⁴ A further example is the modern burglar alarm and CCTV camera, of which police and government are so fond. Some of these are indeed sham, empty boxes made to look like

the 'real' thing but even the actual devices rely on symbolic power for their effectiveness. What stops a criminal is fear of being caught; the alarm and camera rely on their symbolic value to inspire this fear in the criminal. Of course if the alarm and camera is always ignored it loses its value (and in the case of many house and car alarms just becomes a nuisance). What stops a criminal is not the sound of a bell but the association of this sound with the prospect of capture. The alarm sends the symbolic message that owner intends to prosecute the thief. What stopped the revolt of the hundreds of thousands of peasants was not the presence of a few hundred castles and few thousand knights but a complex set of beliefs and symbols which sent the message that revolt would result in death and eternal damnation (another symbolic construct). However, the rather more powerful symbol of money, in the form of the [Poll Tax](#), could inspire revolt.



Ancient British Coins

Function versus Form

Much of the difficulty of defining 'the castle' comes from considering the castle as a, generally uniform, building. The reality is all castles were institutions, social organisations, multifaceted functional bodies concerned, mostly, with government.⁵ In the middle ages such government was personalised in the form of individuals from a ruling elite. Government was the responsibility of a person who lived and worked in buildings which often, if not always, showed the elite

status of this person through a stylised architectural or militaristic form. The scope of the area of government might be as small as a manor or as large as a shire and the resulting buildings generally reflect this difference. In practice, as in contemporary times, government was as much about the personal relationships between the various individuals who governed than about the organisation of collecting and spending taxes and castles, as an embodiment of the persons



involved in government often symbolised both the conscious and unconscious 'power plays' between these men and, very occasional, women.

As medieval rule was heavily decentralised only very few buildings had a symbolic status as centres of national government. The true modern successor to the castle is the Parish Hall and the Shire Hall. The most prominent centre of national government in the middle ages was the [Palace of Westminster](#). It should be noted that the [modern Palace of Westminster](#) retains the martial symbol of the portcullis as its modern 'logo'. Much of this medieval political world, particularly that of the King and major barons, has been explored, in relation to castles, by Richard Eales. The local politics of minor barons and 'knight fee' manors is a much less studied area, although, outside of the Welsh and northern marches, fortified buildings are not much of a feature of such government.

The classic castle story had recognised the administrative aspect of the castle but placed it a minor third behind the military and residential roles, but examinations of White Tower of [The Tower of London](#) (Impey and Parnell, 2000) and keep of [Hedingham Castle](#) (Dixon and Marshall, 1992) show these buildings to be almost entirely court buildings, both in the judicial sense, but more importantly in the sense of retinue of a lord.^{5a} The fourth floor of residential rooms at Hedingham is shown to be a fiction, the tower is fundamentally a 'throne room' for the de Vere earls of Oxford with an lower floor waiting room. The Tower of London is a complex of associated lesser and greater throne rooms and antechambers designed for display and prestige. The whole makes these not the towers of retreat and last resort that

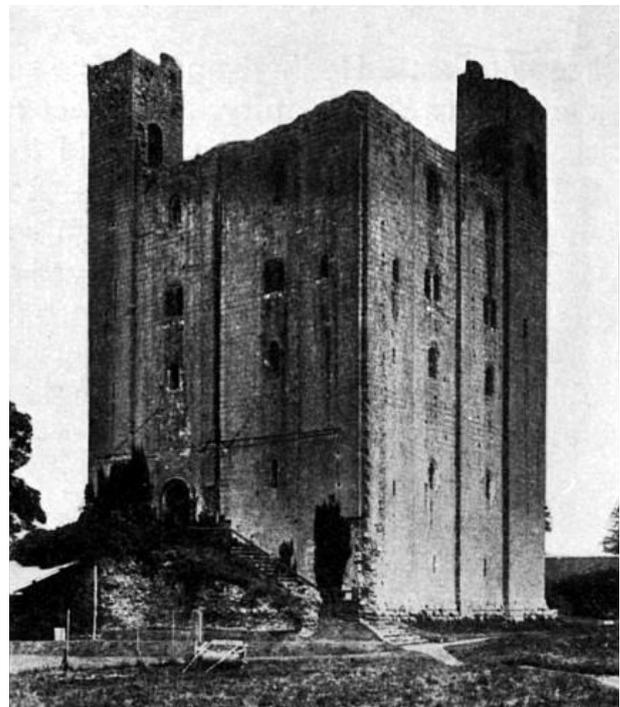
Diversity

Speight also emphasises the need to see castles as diverse; to explore the differences rather than to attempt to group and sub

[Gatehouse-Gazetteer website homepage](#)

the relatively modern name of 'keep' implies, or the domestic quarters of the lord safe from the dubious retainers of Simpson's discredited view of bastard feudalism, but a *magna turris* of a magnate, a place where a lord shows his greatness and receives his due recognition, in highly symbolic ceremonies. The ceremonies were designed to show the complex interpersonal relationships between the various people in the governing classes and their civil servants.

Sarah Speight writes "Medieval chronicles tell us little of building design and format because they are interested in function rather than form. Our belief that the former must dictate the latter is misguided." (Speight, 2004 p. 15). However, if a true understanding of the function of the individual castle is obtained then, providing there is an understanding of symbolism, some tentative stabs at explanation of form can be attempted.



The great tower of Hedingham Castle, Castle Hedingham, Essex

group them into building forms with [contentious labels](#). It is important to realise that this is not just a comment on diversity of

form but on the diversity of function. Clearly a castle like Dover was a military building, always garrisoned by a reasonable number of trained soldiers with munitions, although with a major function as a residential royal palace. But palatial [Sheriff Hutton](#) or even, to modern eyes, relatively grim [Bolton Castle](#) never had garrisons⁶ and most castles were smaller than these. On the other hand consider [Dartington Hall](#) in Devon, intensively studied by Anthony Emery⁷, who makes the point this was never fortified, yet the accommodation for the knightly friends and associates of Richard II's half brother John Holland meant this was, at times, a building filled with trained soldiers.

Looking at the form of a building is not enough and one, important, way of getting some insight into the function of castles is look at the economics. Dr Andy King has looked at some of the small private castles of the northern march and shown how the income of about £200 per annum of such castle owners could not have paid for even small garrisons (King, 2007). These castles did offer some protection from lawlessness but not from military threat from Scotland, although much criminal activity was blamed on the 'Scots'.

Charles Coulson and other recent scholars have shown how subtle, diverse and nuanced the use of the term castle was in the medieval period and a medieval 'castle' might refer to a large masonry building, an

A Norman origin?

The argument of the origin of the castle at the end of the 19th century was one between George Clark and followers who considered the motte to be a Saxon invention and Mrs Armitage and others who ultimately successfully demonstrated the motte to be a Norman introduction to British Isles.⁹ Much of this argument was about defining what was meant in contemporary historical documents and, in particular, the meaning of the Saxon term 'burh'. Ultimately the burh in question is

earthwork and timber structure, with or without a castle mound, a manorial centre with no fortification whatsoever or even a village or town (the village of Bethlehem is called a *castellum* in the Vulgate Bible). The inconsistent use by medieval writers of the term castle, well discussed by Abigail Wheatley (2004), has caused problems for some writers who have a need to simplify history, either from a patronising view of the capabilities of the general reader or for their own inability to cope with the complexities of the past. These authors introduce ideas such as 'true' castles in which tiny mottes built by knights are 'true' fortified castles but massive [Wingfield Manor](#), with gatehouse and towers but clearly much fine residential accommodation is not a 'true' castle. At the extreme some militaristic authors 'prove' their point of view by excluding from their discussion of the medieval 'castle' most castles rather than addressing the complexities of the argument.

In effect it is impossible to define 'the castle' since there is no one such thing. Much of the controversy in castle studies between militarists and revisionists lies in a befuddled use of examples of 'castles' of very different function and need to simplify what should actually remain a complex subject. The answer to a call made by some militarists to not dismiss the military role of castles is to reply "stop putting all 'castles' into one misleading group."⁸

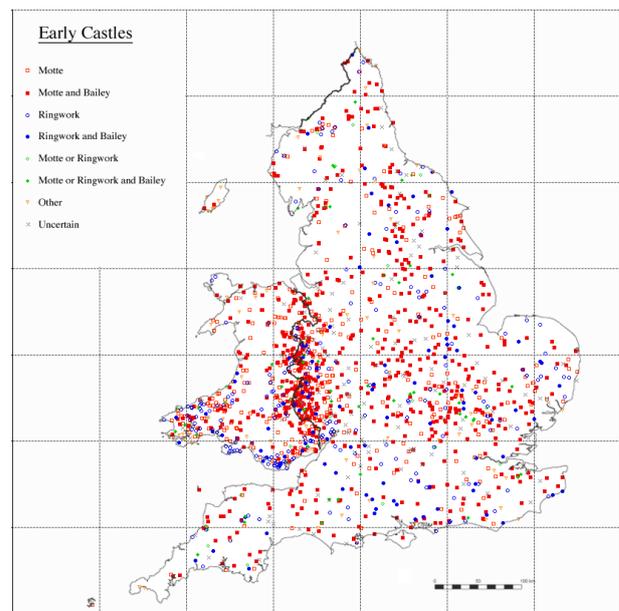
seen to be the communal defences of the Anglo-Saxons garrisoned by everyday Saxon freemen under the system of burghal hideage.

However, archaeological work at [Goltho](#) in Lincolnshire and [Sulgrave](#) in Northamptonshire showed these castles to be built on the site of earlier high status Saxon houses, clearly defended in the case of Goltho although at Sulgrave serious pre-

Conquest defences were not identified. A burh came again to the fore as an origin for the castle. This was a burh of a different sort; the fortified hall of the Saxon thegn. This burh was well described by Ann Williams (1992) along with her pointing out that the castle, as a fortified administrative centre, was a different type of local government from that of the Saxon. So when the Anglo-Saxon chronicles complain about the new castles erected by the Normans this may well refer to new institutions rather than new buildings. The close association of the thegnal burh with the private thegnal chapels which were to often become parish churches should also be noted. Not every medieval parish church started out as a private Saxon chapel, but a great many did. The close association of castle and parish church, often sharing the same enclosure, has often been noted.

It seems likely, on the bases of the close proximity of parish churches, that many, and probably most, early castles do have origins as thegnal burhs. Putting aside for a moment the manner which these thegnal burhs were refurnished to represent the new administrative system, an examination of the castle distribution map shows a broad band of early castles along the line of the [Danelaw](#) boundary (Watling Street and the River Lee). This requires analysis but may reflect 9th to 11th century Saxon concerns with placing some form of military leadership and resources on a border territory.

The Saxons were no strangers to fortifications, although their most notable defensive structures are the urban burhs of Wallingford, Wareham etc. They did also build at least one mound based fortification. This was the massive late Neolithic mound of [Silbury Hill](#) which was fortified in the early 11th century with a rampart around the mound summit and probably a wooden tower of some sort (Excavations in the summer of 2007 found a massive post hole.) This seems to have been built to watch the Roman road which was used by Danish raiding parties and may be associated with the battle of Kennet



Distribution map of C11/C12 castles

in 1006.

For the Saxon thegn the symbol of his status was the *burh-geat*; the gatehouse (see Williams, 1992 and Derek Renn, 1994). The innovation the Norman's did bring to the architecture of the fortified lordly house was the *donjon*; the great tower. This tower had a variety of forms, the pure masonry tower, the wooden tower surmounting a mound of earth, or with a mound of earth piled up around it. This mound, called a *motte*, became a major feature of the Norman castle. Although a number of major castles had tall conical mottes most of the smaller castles have relatively lower, rather less cumbersome to



305—Rougemont Castle.

The gatehouse of Exeter Castle

use, mottes often little more than 2-3 meters in height.

The donjon did not displace the gatehouse as a symbol of the lordly residence. Many lordly residences changed function to become administrative centres, to become castles, without a donjon. Perhaps the most notable is [Exeter castle](#), where the gatehouse, with saxon architectural features, remains as the prime feature. Numerous ringworks may represent fairly simple strengthening of a pre-existing saxon thegnal burh although none of the timber gatehouses remain to hint how the lordly status of these sites was displayed. However, the donjon did, for a while, become the prime symbol of lordly status. A few attempts were made to combine these two traditions such as a Richmond and Ludlow, and possible elsewhere in timber, but these do not seem to have been successful. The donjon, in its various forms, was the symbol of lordship of the Normans.

Much is made of the supposed military value of the motte¹⁰ and the keep, but if the keep was of such value then why did the masters of military engineering, the Romans, never

adopt such a feature and why was the keep so readily lost from later castles. Close critical examination of most castle sites shows they are rarely in prime military location although confusion between administrative convenience, such as being on the site of a major river crossing, can be confused with military tactical function. Of course, castles were involved in warfare, but for a variety of reasons, many psychological, warfare is given much more attention both by modern and medieval writers than actually reflects its real importance. Castles were strongly built high quality buildings and given an attacking armed force and a need to defend oneself the castle is the obvious building to garrison and fortify. In most situations the church is the only alternative strongly built building and on occasions, despite strong inhibitions, churches were fortified and garrisoned in the periods warfare. The fact that castles were, from time to time, besieged does not necessarily mean they were built to resist a siege, although this possibility can not be totally dismissed. The frequent taking and retaking of castles in the welsh wars may well demonstrate how poorly designed castles were as fortifications.

Where castles were built

In general broad sweeping statements about castle locations should be treated with caution as regional variation can be very significant.

As written above the evidence suggests that in England and, to a slightly lesser extent, in Wales the most important factor concerning the location of a castle is the prior social status of the site. Several Norman castles have now been shown to be built on earlier saxon high status sites and it seems likely that most Norman castles were extensive rebuilding of Saxon thegn's bughes or Welsh Llys. The most obvious sign of this association is the close relationship with the parish church and with settlement. Lucy Marten-Holden (2001) shows the clear evidence of this in Suffolk. Her thinking can be more

widely expounded in England and probably also in Wales although in the Welsh marches, Wales and the north of England warfare was more active, extensive and frequent than in the rest of England and military considerations for the site of a castle does become a more important factor. An example would be Richmondshire in North Yorkshire where the major Saxon lordship site of [Gilling](#) may have initially been used as the site of Count Alan's castle but he soon moved to a military stronger, cliff top, site at [Richmond](#), possibly in response to the major uprising which ultimately lead to the vast devastation of the '[Harrying of the North](#)'.

Arguments about the military significance of the location of castles are complex. A recent work on this is Stuart Prior's *A Few Well-*

Positioned Castle: The Norman Art of War (2006). Prior makes use of C19 military texts to define the tactical and strategic criteria for sitting military bases. The tactical considerations, such as a good water supply for the horses (who consume much more water than people), are well made but his argument on strategic positioning is based on a concept of military control of significant positions called 'nodal points'. There are difficulties with the case he puts. Firstly a number of his Norman castles have Saxon origins which suggests it is the Saxon's who were placing thegnal burhs for military reasons rather than the Normans. Secondly a river crossing of a major road is a military 'nodal point' but it is also a sensible place to site a political or economic centre. A castle at a river crossing is not *per se* military as he, at times, seems to assume. There is much useful stuff in Prior's book, such as details of the factors needed to be considered regarding the tactical positioning of military bases (or, indeed, any large high status establishment) - It just that one needs to be cautious in making the leap that a site that does fill his

strategic criteria is military. In fact using the criteria given by Prior show how many castles are not military in position.

The placing of fortifications for military strength on hilltops, appears to be a rare occurrence in England and fairly uncommon in Wales although it does occur, particularly in areas of frequent warfare (Basically the Welsh Marches.). The native Welsh may have had a greater feeling for the Iron Age hillforts built by their ancestors and may have been more ready to reuse these structures than the Normans or English for whom these structures generally had no particular historical or cultural significance.

William the Conqueror placed castles in all the then county towns of England, most of these continued to function as major administrative centres throughout the medieval period. However, the castle at [Derby](#) went out of use quickly, since Derbyshire was generally administered closely with Nottinghamshire and the major castle of [Nottingham](#) thus superseded the small castle at Derby. A



Clun Castle, Shropshire

similar story is true for the small royal castle of [Stafford](#), although this seems to have had a slightly longer service, before its function was taken over by [Shrewsbury](#).

Mary Higham (1991) makes a reasonable case for suggesting that some mottes in Lancashire were sited at river crossing. There is evidence to suggest this may be more widely true. Higham suggests medieval rivers, untamed by modern drainage and management represented a considerable barrier to passage, particularly for those on horseback or with (stolen) livestock and that control of crossing points was an early way of ensuring control until more centralised county control was established. It is possible to suggest that there may have been an uncompleted strategic plan by William I to control all of the crossings of the Trent, for instance. There is also a suggestion that in Wales some castles were sited to act as taxation points. It should be remembered that in most of medieval Wales wealth was based on cattle and this wealth was realised by selling these cattle for meat and hides, mainly in England. Therefore, herds of cattle were moving around Wales and, whilst a band of robbers might slip past a castle, a herd of cattle can not. Therefore, castles sited on roads with some restrictive passage, such as a narrow pass, could both collect taxes and prevent

Administrative centres

Clearly castles were designed with some military features, mainly the ditch, curtain wall and wall-walk rather than towers (which most churches have) or other such features. The castle was the administrative centre of a local government that including the military role of government and that government was personified in individuals who saw themselves as belonging to an elite warrior group. So, whilst in practice most castles were not involved in warfare, the people who built and maintained castles were going to be socially and psychologically influenced into considering them from a military view. On a more practical level, as both administrative centres

the stealing of cattle. Much Welsh warfare may well have just been cattle raids and the concerns regarding this 'warfare' were more about civil matters regarding taxation and theft rather than military matters regarding the political authorities. The story of the very many minor fortifications of the Northern March is much the same. It is one of concern to protect property and livestock from well organised gangs of thieves, often neighbouring families, rather than concerns about warfare between England and Scotland.

Robert Liddiard makes interesting comments about the economic and social costs of castles and suggests that there was some pressure to not site castles in good agricultural areas, at least in East Anglia (Liddiard, 2000). However, in the Welsh and northern marches farmhouse seem to have been fortified and some small mottes in the Welsh marches could really be considered to be 11th and 12th century earthwork 'pele' towers since these were of similar social status and function to the 13th-15th pele towers of the Northern Marches ([King and Spurgeon, 1965](#)). This also shows the difficulty associated with defining the term castle where a large motte and bailey of a major lord, such as [Clun](#), is classed with a small isolated motte of a minor knight such as [Rorrington](#).

where taxes were collected and as the houses of a wealthy elite the castle was a target for thieves and rioters (of all social classes and sometimes in quite large number) so deep ditches, high walls and strong doors did have a pure utilitarian defensive function.

The variety of administration in the middle ages was considerable, manors were of different sizes ruled and sub-ruled by people of vast different status from King to knight with complex systems of lordship and overlordship. Shires and boroughs added other layers of complexity, as did areas under [Forest Law](#) and the various Palatinates and



King Arthur's Castle, Tintagel, Cornwall

the vast amount of land owned by the Church with their own legal and administrative systems. The details are obscure today and could be even then; disputes over land ownership and manorial tenure, some of which resulted in violence, were not uncommon. It should be no surprise that this great variation is reflected in the variation in castles. Combined with this is the multifunctional aspects of the castle as a residence, sometimes a residence only occupied by the full household intermittently and sometimes used as part of great political occasions when other great households had to be put up and entertained. The smallest manor houses seem to have only rarely gained the name castle, although these manor houses were administrative centres. Some high status manor houses also never seemed to bother with the full military symbolism and end up being called palaces or hunting lodges. The reasons for this are going to be complex, occasionally the reason will be purely economic. The cost of even sham fortifications clearly could be a factor. For [Gatehouse-Gazetteer website homepage](#)

every lord who asserted a questionable claim to a manor by building a 'fortified' building another would establish their claim by 'flying below the radar' until time made their claim unassailable. A royal centre of shire administration, such as [Nottingham Castle](#), is clearly going to be dressed up with the full panoply of royal and military symbolism, although surely to reduce cost the mighty Nottingham served Derbyshire as well as Nottinghamshire and [Derby's](#) own post-Conquest castle was soon abandoned and is now mainly forgotten.

Other factors effecting the choice to dress the manor house with full or part military symbolism may well be indiscernible. Clearly some clerical land owners felt no inconsistency between their religious vows and martial display such as Roger Bishop of Salisbury famous for [Devizes castle](#). However, generally cleric owners did not tend to use as much martial display in their manor houses and palaces. The personal psychological factors that lead many modern people to be

be fascinated by war and militarism were shared by medieval people and some individuals, depending of the strength of their ego defences, would have felt greater psychological need to build high walls, towers and gatehouses than other people. [Tintagel Castle](#), Cornwall, seems to have been built purely to associate Richard, Duke of Cornwall, with the Arthurian legends.



not that of a fixed fortification. Garrisoning of castles as a fixed fortification did clearly occur but not systematically. For every well reported siege there are as many barely mentioned, barely opposed, occupations of castles. Instances of reports of castles taken by guile and treachery may well actually represent attempts by both parties to suggest the occupation of a 'stronger' building. A well lead motivated group can put up a considerable defence in even unfortified

However well designed a building is an institution requires people and management to function and these non structural aspects of a buildings design do not survive in the archaeological record. Norman military might was based on the knight, a mobile warrior, and the main military function of the castle was that of a supply base for a mobile unit,

buildings whilst a poorly lead demoralised army may surrender a strong defensive position at an early opportunity¹¹ and such intangibles as 'leadership' would have been more important than the height of walls or the sophistication of defences, although moral could be effected by these things.

Later gatehouses

Ultimately the donjon lost its position as the prime symbol of secular lordship, although it remains a symbol of church dominion in the crenellated church bell tower so common in England and Wales. The gatehouse tradition of lordship of the saxons was re-established by what was now an English aristocracy cut off from it father's french roots, except for a french surname, and reunited with its mother's saxon roots.

From what little that survives it seems the saxon gatehouse was a gate surmounted by a chamber, or even just a platform. The gate at Exeter may well have had a viewing platform^{11a} which allowed a lord and his subject some direct contact, such as still occurs at Buckingham Palace on some royal occasions. Early references to *loggia* in castles may also refer to such viewing platforms. The plain chamber above the gate form of gatehouse continued to be built although the most notable examples are those of abbey's and towns. The chamber had

several functions, some were chapels, some meeting halls, some purely residential.

Later 13th and 14th century castles tended to use a somewhat different form of gatehouse; a twin drum tower form, with a gate in between two round towers. This is a form of gate design used by the Romans and it is probably that the adoption of this form of design had as much to do with a renewed interest in Roman imperial might as to do with improved military design. In the castle the chamber over the gate was usually residential and, most often, the residence of the permanent constable of the castle.

Gatehouse design became more elaborate and recent work at [Dunstanburgh Castle](#) (Ashbee, 2006) has shown how the massive gatehouse of Earl Thomas is situated to impress visitors from the sea and is built, as were the great towers of Hedingham and London, with false features designed to increase the apparent size of the building. It

is perhaps also at Dunstanburgh that another oft repeated 'truth' can be put to rest.

In the 'classic castle story' the gatehouse develops as an increasingly more elaborate defence of the weakest part of the castle. The gatehouse is not the weakest point of a castle. A gateway may be a weak point but even in the earliest fortifications this is where defensive strength is concentrated and the gatehouse rapidly becomes the strongest point of a castle. The weakest point of a castle defences is often the curtain wall. At Dunstanburgh, built for personal aggrandisement and political reason and sited in a very unstrategic location, the gatehouse is clearly the strength of the castle. Even if the, now lost, freshwater fishponds and shallow meres are considered as a defensive moat the west curtain wall is relatively weak and the solitary small Lucy tower does little to strengthen it. The dock, which could have allowed escape in the case of attack and siege is well to the south of the castle, but aligned for a fine view of the Lucy Tower through the gate of the gatehouse.

The increasingly elaborate defences of the gatehouse, with multiple doors, drawbridges, portcullises, murder holes, barbicans etc. rapidly become far in excess of what is needed from a military point of view, even if a garrison large enough to use all these features existed. The gatehouse at the episcopal castle of Devizes described by Leland (Chandler, 1993, p. 501) with seven or eight portcullises is clearly not a military structure but some symbolic statement, possibly related to the well known allegorical sermon *Carmen de Creatione Mundi* by Bishop Robert Grosseteste, where seven barbicans reflect the seven virtues¹². Charles Coulson has pointed out to me that Leland had a



particular fascination with portcullises which were a symbol of the Tudor dynasty but there is no reason to doubt his description. The extremely complex gatehouse at [Caernarfon Castle](#) was never finished and the excess elaboration was clearly not needed and indeed the vast amount of space the planned gatehouse would have taken would have cramped the interior of the castle.

That the drive to build gatehouses was fuelled by concerns of fashion can be seen by the gatehouses of the 15th century. The gate is no longer bounded by round drum towers but by apparently octagonal towers. This style may first have appeared in the upper ward of Windsor Castle as part of Edward III massive rebuilding and reconstruction of Windsor as a new Camelot, but certainly this work inspired much later work. (Brindle, 2006)



Knole, Kent

The 'decline of the gatehouse'

Much has been written about the decline of the castle, most notably by M. W. Thompson. The role of gunpowder in the decline of the castle is often mentioned but rarely properly understood. The personal military role of the lord of the manor had been diminishing from before the development of even early firearms, with [scutage](#) replacing direct service for many shire knights and their overlords. The expense of artillery led to more centralised government for whom a money payment offered much more flexibility than personal service so that, increasingly, the lord of the manor was no longer a warrior and for whom military symbolism had less attraction. It can be seen from a study of later licences to crenellate that the crenellated house increasingly fell out of favour and the domestic house surrounded by a deer park became the height of aristocratic fashion. In effect the symbols of elite status moved away from those of the duties of government and military service and into those of the privileges of nobility. The castle declined because, in part, the economic effects of gunpowder on the structure and organisation of the military meant the nobility stopped being a warrior elite and became an office class. They lived in houses which stopped using martial symbols and started using symbols of imperialism and educational sophistication.

The story of decline of the gatehouse reflects this. As a part of the main residence the gatehouse becomes less military, less imposing and ultimately becomes a porch,

Conclusion

Warfare was not part of the history of most castles and a small part of the history of the others. Military considerations were not part of the *raison d'être* for many castles and a small part for most of the rest. A very few castles were seriously military, such as [Dover Castle](#), with substantially maintained garrisons of a size other than token. It was [Gatehouse-Gazetteer website homepage](#)

still rich with architectural features and symbolic meaning but a slight part of the house. As an entrance into a noble residence it is pushed out to the edge of the surrounding park and becomes a park lodge. No longer the residence of a constable of noble birth but the home to gamekeepers and gardeners. Most of these lodges are rich with displays of status, usually the use of neo-classic architecture to suggest learning and nobility but occasionally still with crenellations.



410.—DOORWAY IN THE RUINS OF THE DUKE'S BUILDING.

A porch at Bolsover Castle

not the castle that allowed William the Conqueror to occupy and suppress England. The castles at York were readily overrun and burnt. What suppressed the English was brutal burnt earth policy of destruction of crops, mills, grain and other such by a mobile army that resulted in mass starvation and death; the so called [Harrying of the North](#). The

castle allowed William and his successors to collect taxes.

The military function of the castle has been markedly overemphasised both by contemporary and modern writers to the detriment of its other functions. There are great psychologically based attractions to warfare both for medieval and modern people and warfare is a powerful notion that attracts much attention (just consider the balance of popular programmes concerned with the medieval period or attendees at a historical re-enactors event). Castles were built to be seen as military buildings but close examination shows how unmilitary they often are. For example the finest motte and bailey in Leicestershire is [Hallaton](#), unusually outside the village, so probably a pure, new build, Norman castle, placed to overlook the Leicestershire Way (now a footpath and minor lane but once the major local road). This is situated on a hillside with a deep gorge on one side and looks strongly defensive. However, close examination shows the bailey is tilted towards the road increasing the prominence of the castle. Purely military logic would have sited the castle slightly further up the hillside so that the castle maintained a good view but that attackers would not be able to see into the bailey to examine the strength of the garrison. Military logic would attempt to hide as much of the castle as possible but it is built to be as visible as possible.

The big difficulty is that castles are not a homogenous group. There are over a hundred castles in Shropshire, but only ten or so of these are large enough to house a military garrison so the others castles are not military. However, these ten or so castles are the castles with extensive documented histories, because of the medieval and modern fascination with warfare and their relative importance as political centres. So a few atypical castles dominate the historic and modern record and vastly distort the picture of castles as a whole. Other issues arise from the not always clear boundaries between

military and civil authority. This is not always clear in the modern world and was distinctly blurry in the medieval world. Is a castle the centre of a military authority or of a civil authority personified in an individual who had some military duties and responsibilities? The evidence suggests that in very many cases it is the latter situation.

However, medieval and modern fascination with warfare, arising from deep seated psychological reasons, has always lead to this small part of the castle story being dominate and, as the human psyche is unlikely to change soon, the castle will continue to be seen misleadingly as a military building. The castle was fundamentally an institution of government. Medieval government, like many more modern governments, used militarism and warfare as a method of control of the masses, rarely directly, more often as a distraction. The castle, rich with military symbolism, but lacking a real garrison, governed the people not by military force but by concepts of dominion. As in more modern times warfare was as much used to distract the people at home from their real problems than as an instrument of foreign or domestic policy and the 'military' castle, with its knightly inhabitant, had its role to play in this.

Although the castle is being redefined the process is far from complete. The distinct possibility remains that there is no such thing as 'the castle' and that the reality is that there were several sets of different medieval institutions, using overlapping architectural forms, to which the term 'castle' is inconsistently applied. For the castle(s) to be even partly defined several paradigms have to be much more clearly explored and explained. The paradigm of the sociopolitical environment has been much explored and simple concepts of feudalism, once a prime part of defining the classic castle, have been brushed away by serious scholarship over the last 2-3 decades (notably Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society* although his work took some time to come into the awareness of British castle

studies). Studies of the castle have been extended into the wider physical environment and landscape. Better analytical tools and databases allow fuller study of the physical building and archaeological remains. Consideration is increasingly being given to the various sociological factors (although these are rather too often described as psychological.)

The paradigm of the unconscious psychological environment has, however, generally been ignored and little sophisticated attempt has been made to understand the psychology of castle builders, castle users and castle non-users. This is an area which many serious writers ignore and

we are left with hunches from those not concerned by academic reputations to give a sense of the personal inner world of the people in and around castles. However, it is just this personal inner world which attracts us to the castle in the modern world and which has led to such a poor understanding of the castle in the past. Until castle studies is willing to grasp the nettle and take the stings of individual psychology the castle will remain poorly understood and will continue to be abused as a symbol. (A fuller exploration of the psychological factors effecting the form of the castle and, more significantly, the modern interpretation of the castle is discussed in the 'paper' [Crenellating the Ego.](#))

Footnotes

¹ Brown writes 'a fortified residence and a residential fortress' (Brown, 1984, p. 7)

^{1a} The Royal Archaeological Institute research project into the origins of the castle in England, sponsoring several important excavations, started around 1966, the 900th anniversary of the Norman Conquest and at its start was probably seen, by many, as an exercise to confirm this truth. The actual results of the excavations were ambiguous, and the main result was the message that excavation that were actually extensive enough to show site origins were extremely difficult and expensive.

² The 'classic castle story' was complete in 1912 when A. Hamilton Thompson had *Military Architecture in England during the Middle Ages* published. However, Brown's numerous books, many designed for the lay reader, such as *The Architecture of Castles A Visual Guide* published 1984 firmly established this 'story' as the orthodoxy.

³ The argument is often portrayed as a conflict between two schools of thought one military the other domestic/symbolic and is occasionally actually argued in this way, particularly by those emotionally wedded to the military school. In fact, amongst serious scholars the issue is about extending the scope, tools and ideas of castle studies to get a fuller understanding of medieval life, although, of course, discussion, sometimes heated, does happen about the use of new tools and about the interpretation of data. The biggest difficulty is the set of outdated ideas new scholars coming into castle studies bring with them and the time it takes to re-educate them so they can move the field forward. The old military deterministic ideas are propagated by an ongoing industry of popular castle books, websites, television, YouTube videocasts etc which feed a modern market which for, psychological reasons, holds a simplistic view of the castle as a solid defence; something which resonates with some individuals' desires to be solidly defended from external 'foes'.

⁴ see also Coulson, 2003, pp. 98-9

⁵ The famous entry in the 1068 entry in the [Laud Chronicle](#) about William the Conqueror states that "he caused castles to be built, which were a sore burden to the poor, a hard man was the king". What was the nature of that burden? Increased digging of ditches, increased surveillance by soldiers or increased taxes? All castles and palaces, although of almost pure residential function, still had a governmental role as symbolic statements of lordly, royal or church authority.

^{5a} In Spain such great towers in castles are called *torre de homenaje* or towers of homage, which is a much better name suggestive of the real function than the 19th century term 'keep'. [footnote added 28-11-2009]

⁶ Bolton, built by a leading lawyer and politician, certainly has very impressive interior security, with portcullises over all courtyard doors and records of locking up times. The house also stored the valuable product of a considerable estate and the security, whilst very impressive, is that of a warehouse, designed

to stop thieves within and as well as without the household. A garrison of soldiers, had it existed, would have probably made these interior security devices even more needed. The castle does seem to have had a few, trusted, gate porters who acted as security guards in much the same way that modern warehouses work.

⁷ Emery repeatedly emphasised that Dartington Hall was unfortified on 30 Sept. 2006 in his paper 'Dartington Hall reconsidered' given at Castle Studies Group autumn conference, The Society of Antiquaries, Burlington House, London.

⁸ In my experience I've never met a revisionist who denied the military role of some castles, such as Dover. The suggestion that revisionists are dismissing a military role often put in a manner which lacks logical rigour and sometimes amounts to *argumentum ad hominem* fallacies, such as suggesting revisionists are 'jumping on a bandwagon'. The slow but steady acceptance of, the so called, revisionist ideas in modern academic castle studies over some now 40 years is hardly a bandwagon and should be compared with the speed with which the classic story of Thompson/Armitage was taken up to become an unquestionable orthodoxy in less than a decade. (the uptake of the idea was effected by contemporary attitudes to Germanic Saxons and the French Normans)

⁹ See J. H. Round's 'The Castles of the Conquest' for an account of this debate notable by Round's brutal frankness and downright rudeness. Ideas of Edwardian gentleman's good manners are put to rest in this extraordinary diatribe which no modern editor would allow in a journal. This frankness might seem refreshing amongst the more covert insults of modern authors but it should also be noted that a good number of academics have been driven to suicide in the past by such abusive articles. Round is, however, almost always right in this article.

¹⁰ In 1903 Round pointed out the very limited military value of the motte "Its summit could hold but a few defenders, and their missiles could at most reach the base of the mound itself." (Round, 1903, p. 335). Add to this that the arrows, like most military equipment, were expensive so actual stocks of ammunition would probably be quite small. The reality of true warfare is that generally the best defence is to 'run to the hills'. Fixed, unsupported, fortifications can and have worked as a military stratagem but this is actual very risky, since the chance to retreat is lost. (An example is blockhouses built by the British in the Boer War.) Frontier fortifications (Hadrian's Wall, Henry VIII's device forts etc.) make more military sense since there are usual good communications which allow mutual support to be given and there remains an opportunity to retire. However what is done and built for warfare and otherwise is that which is perceived or thought to be needed not necessarily that which actually works.

¹¹ In more modern times one can look at the grain silos of Stalingrad and the Maginot line.

^{11a} Pamela Marshall has written considerably on 'appearance' windows to which this comment owes some acknowledgement. In a number of cases it may be there was a more active role as a place where a lord could address a large group. In this circumstance a better analogue, rather than the balcony of Buckingham Palace, could be the window of the Vatican Palace overlooking St Peter's Square where the Pope regularly addresses crowds.

¹² see Wheatley, 2004, pp. 94-98.

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