Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MEDIEVAL CASTLE H33/A



Castles were symbols of power and strength, dominating the landscape.
It was William the Conqueror who first ordered a massive castle building programme across the country when he invaded in 1066. The castles were quite small at first and were made from timber and earth, but to people who had never seen such structures before, they must have looked terrifying. The wood was gradually replaced with stone, like the model in this box. These later stone buildings were very intimidating, heavily fortified and very difficult to attack.

Castles were also homes. The secure walls provided protection for the lord, his family and staff. They also provided refuge for the surrounding villagers if the area came under attack.

But the arrival of gunpowder in the seventeenth century left castles virtually useless for defensive purposes. Some were modified and changed into grand homes for the aristocracy, but many very quickly became little more than rubble as local people removed stonework to reuse as building material. Today, organisations such as English Heritage and The National Trust make great efforts to preserve what remains of these once formidable structures.

Castles for defence

No two castles were exactly the same, but most had the same important defensive features.

Towers



This model castle has round towers - a design which first appeared during the thirteenth century. The major advantage over square shaped towers was that there was no dead ground for the enemy to hide in. Dead ground was the areas hidden from the defender's view because of the square shape. Digging underneath the corners could weaken a square tower, but a round tower didn't have this problem of course because it had no corners! There are eight towers on this model, each overlooking a section of the wall.
The photograph on the right shows the large towers of Skipton Castle in Yorkshire.



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Castle walls

The outer wall of a castle is called the curtain wall. By the Medieval Period these were made of stone and were very thick. The curtain wall of Dover castle was 6 metres thick!



Imagine a castle and the first thing that comes to mind is the crenellations along the top of the castle walls, like those shown in the picture on the right. Crenellations were sometimes built on top of normal houses to make them appear more imposing. A license to crenellate was needed before any building could be fortified in this way.



Behind the crenellated walls lies a very important ledge, known as a wall-walk or allure. It allowed soldiers to move quickly between towers and keep a lookout for approaching enemies. When under attack, this ledge provided an excellent platform for firing arrows whilst hiding behind the crenellations for protection. What an advantage over the enemy! This picture shows the wall-walk at Beaumaris Castle in Wales, which overlooks the sea.

Moat

The moat was a huge trench filled with water, which formed a barrier around the curtain wall. It would have been very difficult to attack the walls or entrance with the moat in the way. The picture below shows the moat of Bodiam Castle in East Sussex. It is particularly wide and deep. The castle looks even more imposing as it rises out of the moat with its towers reflected in the water. Some moats were left dry - the huge trench was considered defence enough.



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Drawbridge

The wooden drawbridge provided the only access to the castle across the moat. It could be raised to completely isolate the castle, making it very difficult for the enemy to approach the gateway. The drawbridges of earlier castles were simply platforms that were removed by sliding them inside the castle walls. This model has ropes or chains indicating that a pulley system raised the bridge up to seal the castle entrance.

Gatehouse

The entrance to the castle was its weakest point and was most likely to be attacked. It was the only part of the external wall that was made of wood and could be burnt down or broken through by ramming. To solve this problem the entrance was strengthened with a gatehouse. The model shows the gatehouse with its sloping roof. The first line of defence was the door itself followed by the portcullis - a huge metal grid that was lowered down over the entrance. The picture below on the left shows the portcullis tucked up into the roof of the gatehouse, ready to be lowered. The gatehouse had several murder holes (pictured in the middle) through which stones and boiling water could be dropped on the heads of the enemy. Similar holes are sometimes found along the curtain wall. These are called machicolations (pictured on the right).







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Castles for living

Some people today dream of living in a castle, but in reality a medieval castle was a noisy, smelly and cold place to live.

Imagine the scene: the only heating came from a few fireplaces and the walls were usually damp. Glass for the windows was very expensive and rarely used. The larger windows sometimes had wooden shutters or an animal skin cover to keep the warmth in and the weather out. Animals wandered around inside the castle walls - notice the stable block built against the straight part of the curtain wall on the model. The blacksmith hammering ironwork into shape, soldiers practicing their skills and many servants washing, cooking and cleaning all added to the noise.

Entertainment

Despite the hardships of castle life, there was still fun to be had. Musicians, jesters, acrobats and singers were regular visitors and provided light relief from the rigours of daily life and the thought of attack. The entertainment usually took part in the ward (the open space inside the walls) or in the hall if the weather was bad.

Hall



The hall was a multi-purpose room where meals were eaten, meetings were held, guests slept and entertainment took place. This picture shows the inside of a fourteenth century hall. The pile of logs in the middle is the hearth, which would have provided the heat for the room. The hall usually had the largest windows to let in as much natural light as possible. The 'L' shaped building in the smaller section of this model castle is most likely the hall. Can you see the tall arched windows?

Chapel



The large building in the other part of the model castle is the chapel. Religion played a very important role in castle life and the chapel was often the most elaborately decorated and best kept building in the whole castle. This picture shows the inside of the chapel at Warwick Castle.