

INTRODUCTION

Before break of day on Monday, 2 February 1355, the feast of the Purification of the Virgin, the bishop of Salisbury presented himself at the bar of the Court of Common Pleas in the great hall of Westminster Palace. Bishop Wyville had come to the court to settle a long-running legal dispute by the most dramatic of means, a trial by combat, and the court yearbook enthusiastically reports every detail of the preliminaries.¹ To assert his claim the bishop was joined at the bar by his champion, a certain Richard Shawell. The champion was dressed – as convention dictated – not in armour but in a long jerkin of white leather and a red silk surcoat painted with the arms of the bishop. Shawell's battlepick, the weapon conventional in such combats, was carried beside him by a knight, and standing behind the champion was a servant holding a specially shaped shield. As the group stood before the bar the servant raised this shield, which – we are told – was elaborately painted with figures, above the champion's head. This action was probably intended to identify him to the court and the colours under which he fought, in this case almost certainly an image of the Virgin Mary, the patroness of Salisbury Cathedral.

The claim that Bishop Wyville had come to assert through force of arms was the ownership of the castle

of Sherborne in Dorset, one of four outstandingly ambitious castles built in the early twelfth century by a predecessor of his, Roger, bishop of Salisbury from 1103 to 1139. The castle had been seized by the crown almost immediately after its construction, Bishop Roger having fallen into disgrace at the end of his life. But two centuries had not effaced the memory of this lost possession. When Edward III granted Sherborne to William Montacute, earl of Salisbury, in 1337, Bishop Wyville immediately took the opportunity of its return into private hands to sue for recovery. The earl, a true tactician, responded by declaring his intention to defend his right by combat. This placed Wyville in an awkward position; as a cleric, combat was hardly an appropriate means for him to settle a lawsuit. But after having been advised by his lawyers that he must either fight or lose the case, he acceded to the challenge. At the same time he mobilised all the spiritual resources at his disposal to offer up devout prayers and Masses for the happy outcome of the encounter.

Next to present himself at the bar was the defendant, the earl of Salisbury. His champion, Nicholas, was also dressed in a white leather jerkin and red surcoat, but this bore the arms of his master, Montacute. As before, the earl's champion was displayed to

Facing page: Bolton, North Yorkshire.





the court by having his shield raised above his head. With both parties in attendance the sergeants-at-law then confirmed the determination of their respective clients to pursue the case. Having heard this formal statement of intent, Justice Green, the presiding judge, directed that the arms and harness of the champions be surrendered for inspection. To give time for this to be done properly and also to make enquiry as to whether there was any fraud or deceit in the case, he delayed the combat for a full week. In the meantime it was instructed that accommodation should be found for all concerned within the Palace of Westminster.

The week passed and the champions returned to the bar with their patrons as before. But Justice Green now announced that the king had ordered a stay of the combat for three more days. He also said that there were defects in the harness of the two champions – rumour had it that Shawell had illegally filled his with prayer rolls and charms. So high did feeling now run in the court that neither side would be the first to leave the bar, and Justice Green was forced to threaten the bishop with loss of the case unless he would move away first. And no doubt it was this spirit of brinkmanship that really had control of the proceedings, because before the dispute came to issue three days later the two parties had decided to remove it from the uncertain sphere of combat altogether. Upon receiving payment of the very substantial sum of 2,500 marks, the earl resigned his claim to Sherborne Castle. It must have been with an air of blustering triumph, therefore, that the bishop came to the bar with his champion for the third and last time. The earl was called for to answer his claim, but no one appeared. As the year-book of the court succinctly notes, the default was noted. Sherborne Castle belonged once more to the bishop and see of Salisbury.

Twenty years later Bishop Wyville died in the very castle he had striven to recover. His body was taken to Salisbury Cathedral for burial and there in the middle of the choir it was laid to rest beneath an extraordinary monumental brass (pl. 1). Wyville is depicted on it as a praying figure dressed in full pontifical vestments with a mitre and crosier. But rather than being displayed full-length – as one would expect of such an effigy – his figure is awkwardly enclosed within a symmetrical frame of architecture. This unmistakably evokes a castle with three concentric walls and a high central tower, all busy with the trappings of fortification: towers, turrets, battlements, arrow slits, openings for cannon and machicolis vents for dropping missiles

1 (facing page) A rubbing of the funerary brass of Bishop Wyville (d. 1375), which formerly lay in the choir of Salisbury Cathedral, Wiltshire. The bishop is shown inside a castle with a champion at the gates and rabbits emerging from warrens around the walls. Set in the liturgical heart of the church, the monument prominently recorded the restitution to the see by the bishop of two lost possessions: Sherborne Castle and the chase of Bere. The funerary inscription, now partly lost, runs around the edge of the stone slab in which the brass is set. The brass is today preserved in a side chapel of the cathedral.

from the wall heads. The gates are shown with portcullises, and barring the main entrance to the building is a bearded figure brandishing a battlepick in the garb of a champion. In a charming but important detail there are also several rabbits emerging from warren runs around the walls of the castle.

The inscription on the monument specifically identifies the castle as that of Sherborne and by extension the champion at the gates as Richard Shawell. It reads:

Here lies Robert Wyville, of happy memory, Bishop of the church of Salisbury, who ruled that church peaceably and laudably for more than forty-five years; he prudently gathered together the dispersed possessions of the church, and they having been collected, he maintained them as a vigilant pastor. And amongst the least of his other gifts he recovered in the manner of an intrepid champion the castle of Sherborne, which for two hundred years or more had been withheld from this church by hand of military might, and he also obtained restitution to the same church of the chase of Bere; who on the 4th day of September in the year of Our Lord 1375 and the 46th year since his consecration, as the Most High pleased, he rendered his debt of human nature in the said castle. May He, in whose power he hoped and believed, have mercy on his soul.²

This monument makes a perfect introduction to this book because it clearly sets out some of the complications inherent in understanding castles and their architecture. At the heart of the image is a startling disjunction, easily legible even to a modern audience. By his vestments and marks of office Wyville is an ecclesiastic and a pastor, forbidden by canon law to draw blood or bear arms. Yet he stands in the heart of a castle bristling with fortifications in an architectural celebration of war. The medieval world was fully alive to the contradiction implicit in this juxtaposition and, though it was a widely accepted reality that spiritual authority was inextricably allied to secular power, Wyville's monument would certainly have found contemporary critics. But to read this monument purely as a contradiction would be to miss a crucial point: Wyville stands in a castle, and that meant something very special to a medieval audience.

In this context the castle is not a reflection of Wyville's ambition as a soldier, though it does boast of his determination to defend the rights of the see of Salisbury. Rather, it serves as a symbol of his temporal lordship, technically independent from his office as a

bishop yet – as the inscription emphasises – inherited with it and essential to its prestige. The detail of the rabbit warren too – presumably a reference to his restitution of the chase of Bere to the church – illustrates one of the most prestigious and jealously defended rights of lordship, that of hunting. In effect, Wyville is proclaiming himself on this monument as a prince of both the church and the state, dressed in the robes of the former and presented within the attributes of the latter.

As a whole, this image also articulates what might be understood as the core qualities or characteristics of the castle, a series of inextricably twisted strands of association that confront students of the subject like a Gordian knot. The castle is a symbol: Wyville presents Sherborne as an attribute of lordship and power. But the symbolism of the castle is effectively underwritten by its manifest physical strength: the castle appears imposing, fortified and threatening. Its character in these respects is enhanced by the busy composition of the architectural frame around the figure. The detailing of this both adds to the splendour of the building and accentuates its function. As sports cars are admired for their sleek curves – curves that both suggest and permit driving at speed – so were castle fortifications clearly deemed beautiful for their appearance of deadly impregnability. And Wyville's castle looks marvellously impregnable. Bound up in this is an admiration for warlike attributes. Because medieval and early modern society had a fighting class of noblemen and knights, so the architectural celebration of war evoked their prestige and power. In effect, castles were at once understood as symbolic, magnificent, powerful and prestigious buildings, each quality reinforcing the other.

As a final twist, it is worth making the obvious point that the castle on the monument is not properly a building at all but an image of one. Nor, as a matter of fact, does it bear the slightest physical similarity to the surviving ruins of Sherborne Castle (see pls 60 and 61). This illustrates a crowning and vitally important point that complicates but also enriches the task of this book immeasurably. The castle is an ideal, and one, moreover, that can be easily evoked. That is to say, if you make the right visual references an audience will recognise a castle in almost any object. Delight in this fact is widely apparent in medieval and early modern England, the forms of the castles appearing in everything from the architecture of churches to table centrepieces. This also remains true today, too, as the

imagery of films, computer games and any number of other contemporary objects powerfully and colourfully illustrate.

THE CASTLE AND ITS DEFINITION

Books on castles necessarily begin by posing the question 'what is a castle?'. And the response is consistently the same. A castle, we are told, is the private and fortified residence of a lord. By this definition castles seem relatively easy to identify. Their character as fortifications removes them from the sphere of merely domestic building and their role as lordly residences not only distinguishes them from forts or defended settlements but also places them in a specific European historical and social context: the feudal society of the Middle Ages. As conventionally represented, this feudal society was geared for the prosecution of war on horseback. Knights, the soldiery of such a society, were very expensive to equip and their expertise in the saddle the product of long training and experience. In combination, these circumstances conspired to create a professional fighting class maintained on agricultural wealth. Castles were the houses in which this class lived; by which they defended and managed their property; and from which they practised their profession.

It is important to understand that this definition has reinforced a fixed picture of these buildings and their role in English history. In essentials, this picture might be outlined as follows: the castle was introduced by the Normans at the Conquest, who used it to enforce the Norman, feudal political settlement over an unwilling Anglo-Saxon populace. This settlement, however, was inherently unstable, because if royal government failed everyone withdrew to their strongholds to wage private war. Attempts were made to check the construction of private castles, but it was only when new siege techniques rendered earth and wood defences obsolete in the late twelfth century that the sheer cost of stone fortification necessarily limited their construction, with a consequent improvement in law and order.

For the next century the architect laboured in stone for the king and England's greatest magnates to defeat the ingenuity of the siege engineer in a golden age of castle building. But the technology of war gradually overtook the castle and, by the late fourteenth century, they were becoming obsolete. And at this moment something critical happened: in response to their obsolescence castles ceased to be built as truly defensible

structures. As Allen Brown put it in his classic study *English Castles*: 'the unique combination of fortress and personal, lordly residence, which is the castle, falls apart, and when it does so the history of the castle as a living and viable type of building is at an end'.³ At this moment, therefore, the castle tradition is portrayed as entering into decline, a passage accelerated both by the development of cannon and increasingly centralised government. Moreover, except on its turbulent northern border, England now enjoyed comparative peace, and men and women wanted comfortable houses, not draughty fortresses, to live in. So fortification became divorced from domestic living; the castle was abandoned, and the history of the country house began.

The rights and wrongs of this thesis will be a central concern of this book, but two elements of it are of particular importance to this discussion. Not only does it represent castles throughout as an essentially military phenomenon, but also their whole history is understood in terms of an evolutionary struggle between attacker and attacked for technological superiority in war: the Norman versus the Anglo-Saxon, the siege engineer versus the architect. These ideas have determined that the castle has traditionally been the natural preserve of the military historian, a monopoly that was broken only in the 1980s. Furthermore, its architecture has become the subject of typological study, as if it were susceptible to Darwinian evolutionary explanation. This traces the development of defences in response to changes in warfare from the simple to the more complex and, ultimately, to decadent display in obsolescence.

Nothing could be more appealing than the clarity with which the received definition of the castle presents its material, or the grand cyclical narrative of birth, maturity and dotage that it imposes on its subject. Yet it also raises many difficulties and involves one intellectual sleight of hand. By appropriating 'castle' as a technical term it follows that there is a correct and an improper usage of the word. But this word was not technically applied in medieval and early modern usage; nor was there one single term used to describe the buildings that we understand to be castles today. A twelfth-century selection of words that have been treated by modern scholars, and sometimes selectively, as synonyms for castle might include the Anglo-Norman *chastel* and the Latin *castellum*, *arx*, *mota*, *turris*, *oppidum*, *munitiones*, *firmitas* and *municipium*.⁴ Indeed, nearly all these Latin words can be found in

one paragraph of a treaty agreed at Westminster in 1153 between King Stephen and the future Henry II to describe a group of buildings that everyone today would simply term castles.⁵ To make the point another way, one castle in England whose medieval name has remained in continuous use to the present is in London. Confusingly, this building is not familiar to us as London Castle, but by its medieval name *Turris Londiniensis*, the Tower of London.

Yet rather than acknowledge that the word castle is a useful umbrella term, the conventional solution to the problem of reconciling the difference between the historical and the modern usage of the word has been to create new categories of building. Most popular amongst these categories has been the 'real' castle, so-called. The Real Castle is an invention of historians and architectural historians and is a term bestowed approvingly upon buildings that conform to the technical requisites of a castle *as it has been defined by them*. That is to say that it is a private, lordly residence that they deem to be truly defensible. Of course, once you have Real Castles – which are the things you are also 'really' interested in – everything else must either be described as something different or demoted to the status of being, in some sense, a fake.

So the Anglo-Saxon chronicler who described Dover as possessing a *castelle* in 1051 – before the introduction of feudalism and the castle at the Conquest – was really, technically speaking about a fortified settlement or *burh*.⁶ And when the late medieval nobility built residences that they called castles, some modern scholars have claimed a more profound insight. Without the fortifications of Real Castles they must be politely accorded titles such as 'castles of display' and 'chivalric castles', residences shorn of proper fortifications and caparisoned in crenellations. These are the *castrati* of castle studies: you can admire them for their flamboyant virtuosity but they sing in the wrong register.

This whole process of recategorising castles according to a modern technical vocabulary is both confusing and destructive. Moreover, as applied to different periods it has distorted the study of castles in different ways. During the early Middle Ages it served to reduce the castle, focusing attention narrowly on the buildings and defences at the expense of what they contained and what surrounded them. Indeed, one of the great achievements of recent writers in the field has been to bring the wider physical and social context of castles into proper consideration.⁷ With regard to later castles it has generated a huge quantity of highly sub-

jective discussion about the relative efficacy of fortifications in an attempt to trace the supposed decline of this tradition of building.

In this latter context the application of a technical vocabulary seems particularly absurd. This cannot be presented as a simple problem, but it seems logical that if someone calls the building they construct a castle, the task of the modern scholar is to explain why they accorded it that title and not to presume to explain why they got it wrong. We are, after all, the students, not the instructors of the past. As a matter of fact, however, even up to the seventeenth century it can be difficult to find unambiguous record of what particular residences were entitled by those who built them. Moreover, just to confuse matters, administrative documentation can refer to all kinds of major residences as 'manors' or 'manor places' simply because they are the seats of lordly authority. This denomination, therefore, does not necessarily prove that a house was a manor as distinct from a castle. In fact, documentation can be openly contradictory on this point. In a survey of Thornbury made in 1521, the duke of Buckingham's splendid new residence is described as 'the manor or castell' for precisely this reason.⁸ Similarly, in 1340 the buildings of Oakham Castle were described in an inquisition as being 'likewise called the manor'.⁹ On occasion, even the word castle can be left aside: in Sir John Paston's will of 31 October 1477, the great fifteenth-century brick residence of Caister in Norfolk – which is otherwise repeatedly called a castle in this period – is referred to as 'my seid maner and fortresse'.¹⁰

Such matters aside, satisfaction with the received definition of the castle has been reinforced by two circumstances. First, that interest in the field has always concentrated on the early development of castles – say from the eleventh century to the thirteenth. In this period the application of the word castle as a technical term does much less damage to its subject than it does from the late medieval period onwards. Indeed, it should be emphasised that the terms by which we discuss castles are really formulated in relation to these early buildings. Second, that despite the recent efforts of a small body of scholars, English secular architecture after about 1350 remains astonishingly under-discussed and under-researched. It should be stressed that this lacuna is not restricted to the field of secular architecture. Across the board the discussion of Gothic architecture in England is thin after 1400, but there is not even a published overview of the subject after 1485.¹¹

This shortcoming in the literature expresses, and has served to reaffirm, a presumption scored deep into English historiography and the popular consciousness: that the Middle Ages began to die on its feet from the mid-fourteenth century and that life – political, social, religious and artistic – was reinvented by the Tudors at the touch of the Renaissance. One victim of this grotesquely distorted vision has undoubtedly been the castle. However you define the word, the fact remains that the medieval and early modern nobility of England occupied, built and rebuilt buildings that they called castles. It is no exaggeration to say that, whether as a principal residence or as one in a suite of great residences, from 1066 to 1640 a nobleman without a castle was like a knight without a horse. If our understanding of castles cannot accommodate this reality, we need a looser working definition of these buildings lest we do an academic violence to this architectural tradition.

I would advocate the following: a castle is the residence of a lord made imposing through the architectural trappings of fortification.

The advantage of this definition is that it sidesteps the whole issue of defence without denying its importance. Added to this it can, crucially, accommodate the full diversity of castles within England from the Tower of London in the eleventh century to Bolsover in the seventeenth. This book is written in the belief that these buildings do share something in common: Bolsover is not just a pastiche of the Tower but built as part of a continuous and integral tradition of English architecture. Moreover, this tradition was underwritten by the continued existence of a social class: the patrons of these two castles shared, however remotely, what might be termed a knightly vocation. In 1066 William the Conqueror, as the duke of Normandy, famously led his forces to triumph at Hastings. And in 1644 William Cavendish, then the earl of Newcastle, by virtue of his nobility, led a royalist army to catastrophe at Marston Moor. Knighthood and chivalry were not revived as fanciful concepts in early modern England; they had never died as living concerns.

It should be said that these ideas also survived the events of the Civil War, but there are good reasons why this survey does not carry the history of the castle beyond 1650. Most importantly, it is because the Civil War constituted a massive hiatus in the history of English cultural, social and political life. In its events, the last continuities that bound England to the medieval past were decisively severed. Amongst its

casualties were numerous of the castles discussed in these pages. In the course of a decade, buildings that had been adapted over centuries as great residences were deliberately demolished and their remains left to ruin. To compound this destruction, following the Civil War patrons and practitioners of architecture took their art in decisively new directions. The history of the castle in England was far from over in 1650; indeed, it is not over today. Nevertheless, the story of the modern English castle, which evolved from the late seventeenth century onwards, is in some important respects totally different from that of its medieval predecessor.

The strands of continuity that lend this narrative between 1066 and 1650 coherence are accompanied by a multitude of important changes in social, artistic, economic and political life, and it is not the intention to belittle these. In artistic terms this survey spans three major periods of artistic change, popularly termed the Romanesque (or Norman), Gothic and Renaissance. For all the continuities between these periods, and whatever may be the limitations of their modern labels, at the inception of each there is apparent a sense of novelty that contemporaries celebrated and delighted in. One of the themes of this book will be the manner in which the physical form of the castle responded to the ideas current in each period while retaining an essential integrity.

On a more practical level, over the 600-year period covered by this book there was a real reduction in the number of castles both in active use and being newly founded in England. In purely statistical terms, despite a steady flow of new foundations, from about 1120 the number of castles in England was probably in continuous and more or less rapid decline. This phenomenon is conventionally presented as evidence that the castle was an object of diminishing importance, but it can also be explained in more positive terms and these are worth considering briefly.

PATTERNS OF CASTLE

CONSTRUCTION

The pattern of castle foundation and maintenance has always been closely allied with the material resources and wealth provided by land. It is in direct consequence that more castles were established in the half-century or so following the Norman Conquest than at any other time in English history, when the kingdom

was in the process of redistribution amongst its new rulers. Many of the great castle foundations of this period, sustained on vast estates, became the bones of the medieval kingdom of England. Not only did they naturally develop into hubs of administration and justice, but through their attendant estates they also became great inheritances in their own right. Consequently, such castles also became the preserve of the very greatest noble families and were developed by them century after century as fixtures in the English landscape.

Whatever happened to these buildings architecturally across the centuries – however their fortifications were compromised for the sake of fashion and luxurious living – their titles as castles usually remained unchanged. Moreover, they continued to be, quite simply, the grandest residences you could own. In a world where birth and descent were the credentials for power, urgently to be acquired if not already possessed, this enthusiasm for ancient and inherited residences is hardly to be wondered at. Nor is the extraordinary prestige attached to them. Some, of course, such as Windsor Castle, have survived to the present day. Even in the twenty-first century no physical change can compromise the status of this building as a castle or dim its prestige as the principal inherited seat of England's sovereigns. Its medieval estate is still represented by the Little and Great Parks, which in their reconstituted seventeenth-century form comprise a huge, undeveloped swathe of landscape in one of the richest and most densely populated areas of Europe.¹² Such possessions are by definition inheritances, objects far beyond the compass of mere wealth.

To this group of major castles the English nobility never ceased to make occasional additions, usually by upgrading existing manors and residences. But the threshold for membership in both architectural and landed terms was always very high. Even by the late twelfth century new castles were usually smaller than their predecessors. This did not necessarily make them modest buildings, and what they lacked in terms of landed endowment they often made up for in architectural splendour. When new castle foundations of this kind did occur they were usually the product of very particular circumstances, most commonly the elevation of an individual to the peerage. Indeed, the connection between noble title and castle construction will become a familiar theme of this book. Where new foundations were created it was necessary that they stood direct architectural comparison to an established

canon of great castles. As we shall see, this could ensure a remarkable degree of conformity in castle design over the six centuries covered by this book.

But if the foundation of major castles became an increasing rarity, their wastage before the events of the Civil War was uncommon too. This usually occurred in direct consequence of some twist in dynastic politics, such as the downfall of a family – either through the extinction of the male line or political disgrace. It also frequently resulted from the passage of a castle into the hands of the crown. Ownership by the crown, it should be said, was a doubtful privilege for a castle throughout the medieval and early modern period. While kings and queens might be very active in maintaining castles at moments of political crisis, at all other times they tended only to invest in those that they used or liked. Added to this, castles in crown ownership were run by men (and occasionally women) primarily interested in exploiting them as a source of income. So the history of most royal buildings, including castles, is of periods of total neglect, sometimes accompanied by the stripping of materials by unscrupulous custodians, punctuated with moments of lavish investment.

Amongst the lesser patrimonies or landed inheritances of England the pattern of castle foundation was rather different. The numbers of castles established on relatively small estates peaked around 1120 and then the numbers declined steeply. This was true to such an extent that after 1400 the establishment of new castles by those of relatively modest means became a distinct rarity. Only on the northern march with Scotland did the small-scale castle survive in the form of the tower house as a vigorous entity into the early modern period. Contrary to what is sometimes supposed, the move away from smaller castles to houses in the kingdom at large had little to do with considerations of safety – as the surviving letters of the Paston family show, life in East Anglia in the late fifteenth century witnessed a good deal of organised violence. Rather it is to be explained in terms of the widening spectrum and growing sophistication of domestic architecture in late medieval and early modern England.

In artistic terms, the driving force behind this development until the Reformation in the 1540s was a determination to apply the dazzling innovations of ecclesiastical architecture, and particularly its window forms, to domestic design. The importance of this phenomenon can scarcely be overstated. As a result, there gradually developed a common vocabulary of archi-

tectural forms embracing domestic, castle and ecclesiastical architecture. One outcome of this convergence of traditions, which was largely complete by the early fourteenth century, was that different types of building ceased to be necessarily distinguishable in terms of architectural detail alone: a church and a castle might share identical detailing, such as battlements, buttresses and complex window tracery. Instead, they contrasted with one another by the manner in which their common details were marshalled. Perhaps the only important architectural form specific to domestic buildings was the chimney, an outward sign of domestic comfort and wealth.

The contribution of castle architecture, with its connotations of chivalry and power, to the pool of common architectural details was hugely important. So admired were the architectural trappings of fortification that virtually all major buildings, including churches, in late medieval and early modern Britain in some way made play with them. Moreover, in domestic design the influence of castles is strongly apparent in the organisation and massing of elements. To such an extent, in fact, that almost all residential buildings of any pretension before the 1640s can be read as evocations of castles. The formidable stone walls of towers might dissolve into grids of glass and battlements into elaborate ornament, but the trappings of the castle lived on in grand domestic architecture until the advent of an accomplished and idiomatic classicism by designers such as Inigo Jones. On occasion they even survived beyond this. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed not so much the decline of the castle as its universal triumph made possible by the versatility and appeal of its forms.

Yet for all the increasing difficulty of articulating the difference between a castle and other types of domestic architecture, the distinction between them does still apply. More than that, as the architectural distinctions blurred, the decision to call something a castle became much more pointed. And, fascinatingly, the enthusiasm for entitling great residences ‘castles’ did not wane, though the individuals who chose to do so belonged to an ever more exclusive social circle. Rather in the manner of Old Master paintings today, castles gradually priced themselves out of the market until they were the preserve of the very richest in the kingdom.

THE LICENSING OF FORTIFICATIONS

In 1066 William the Conqueror inherited a royal bureaucracy in England far more complex and sophisticated than the one he was familiar with in Normandy. Indeed, it may be only after the Conquest that he adopted a long-standing English habit of authenticating documents by attaching a wax seal impressed with an image to them. By the twelfth century the professional clerks of this royal bureaucracy had been organised into a department called chancery under the control of the chancellor, who held the principal or great seal of the realm. Throughout the Middle Ages and beyond the royal bureaucracy grew steadily as central government touched the lives of people in ever more varied and complex ways. The whole trend of this bureaucracy, as with all bureaucracies, was to expand and specialise in response to the growing weight of work. From the accession of King John in 1199 its output also came to be systematically enrolled or calendared, copied on long rolls of parchment that would last the passage of time and be available for future reference.¹³

The licensing of fortifications was a royal prerogative (though at different periods there were others in England who enjoyed quasi-regal powers over particular territories and also licensed castle construction within them: the bishop of Durham, the earl of Chester and the earl of Lancaster), and consequently within this huge and varied body of royal documentation are numerous references to fortifications and castles. An early example is the charter issued by Henry I in January 1127 granting custody of Rochester Castle to William de Corbeil, then archbishop of Canterbury, and to his successors in perpetuity. As part of the grant, the king also gave permission for the construction of a fortification (*munitionem*) or tower (*turris*), as the archbishop pleased. The grant is universally agreed to refer to the construction of the surviving great tower at Rochester, one of the largest buildings of its kind ever erected in Europe (see pp. 115–18).¹⁴

It has long been assumed that the king actively used his powers to license fortifications as a means of managing the realm, granting supporters permission to build castles and preventing opponents from creating strongholds that would permit them to resist royal authority.¹⁵ As a result charters regarding fortification have been subject to particular attention by historians. Moreover, those enrolled by chancery from 1200 onwards have been grouped together since the nine-

teenth century as a specific category of document and collectively dubbed licences to crenellate.¹⁶ This name was chosen because such licences usually permit in specific terms the fortification of buildings by the addition of battlements (or crenellations), walls and towers.

Depending on how you choose to define them, licences to crenellate continued to be issued until the end of the sixteenth century, as at Mountgrevelle in Warwickshire in 1567.¹⁷ There is also one possible late runner issued in 1622 for Millom in Cumberland, authoritatively cited but untraceable today.¹⁸ Licences can variously refer to towns, monastic sites and private residences, and the number issued peaked in the fourteenth century. In total, approximately five hundred and fifty have been identified over this entire period for sites in England.¹⁹

Over the last twenty years the subject of royal letters regarding fortifications has been radically reappraised. It has been compellingly argued, notably by Charles Coulson, that English kings did not attempt to condition castle construction through a system of licensing.²⁰ Instead, that they issued licences to crenellate in response to the demand of petitioners. These individuals, moreover, were primarily interested in getting licences because they gave royal sanction for new building projects that conveyed a message about their social position. In effect, such licences confirmed in an open, royal letter that you were a figure of the requisite social status to occupy a castle. Some authorities have criticised this analysis,²¹ but in my opinion, setting aside some niceties, the point stands.

Apart from anything else, this conclusion is amply borne out on many levels by the evidence of the licences themselves, most obviously because the vast majority were issued as ‘patent’ or public letters under the royal seal. As physical objects, in other words, they comprised a sheet of parchment with a seal attached on a silk cord or vellum strip. This was in contrast to ‘close’ letters issued by the king, which were physically sealed shut as private correspondence. That patent charters had a demonstrative and symbolic importance is clearly indicated by medieval artistic representations of acts of foundation or endowment. These commonly show a king handing out a charter with a seal appended and a legible text. Such, for example, is the case with the depiction *circa* 1400 of the foundation of the honour of Richmond by William the Conqueror;²² the lost fifteenth-century panel of glass depicting the foundation of Tamworth Castle, Staffordshire;²³ or the much repainted late medieval panel of St John of Bev-

erley receiving special liberties from King Athelstan on behalf of his minster church (pl. 3).

One unique instance of a patent charter – though in this case not a royal one – being physically set in the context of a castle as an endorsement and explanation of its foundation occurs at Cooling in Kent. Here, a beautifully engraved charter of enamelled brass hangs on the outer gate of the castle (pl. 4). This publicly proclaims the castle to be a fortification of value to the country at large. The idea, incidentally, is commonly voiced in the context of royal licences for town fortification.

That licences were of symbolic importance is further demonstrated in statistical terms. For example, there are far fewer licences than fortifications – a curious disjunction if all fortifications had to be licensed for the security of the realm. Moreover, the vast majority of licences issued to private individuals were granted to those of knightly or clerical status (around two hundred) rather than to the titled or high nobility. Throughout the entire Middle Ages only three dukes and fifteen earls ever received a licence from the king to fortify residences as castles. This clearly does not accord with the number that must have been demanded by this group had the monarchy acted to curb their power through such licensing.

It is significant, too, that the internal evidence of the licences illustrates a concern with more than mere fortification. Many additionally confer permission to enclose land and create parks or – as in the case of Oxburgh in Norfolk – to found markets. Such licences are, in effect, comprehensive passports to the trappings of medieval lordship. Quite as significant are the wide variations apparent in what they say. Considering the tendency of the chancery to develop textual formulae in commonly issued documents, such variations strongly imply that the licences are rehearsing terms suggested by the petitioner. In other words, rather than the king issuing these documents on his own terms, the chancery was obligingly providing licences à la carte to those who were prepared to pay for them. The texts of licences should, therefore, be understood as expressing the demands and opinions of those to whom they were issued. As a matter of fact, this is entirely in keeping with the practice of issuing royal licences for other undertakings, such as the establishment of religious foundations.

Viewed in these terms, licences offer a valuable insight into the interests and concerns of builders. They can also offer valuable evidence for dating build-



ings, though there are complications in using them for this purpose. The Oxburgh licence, for example, includes a pardon for work already undertaken, evidence that the licence was acquired as an afterthought. In other cases, it would appear that licences were issued as a blank cheque sanctioning the present and future construction of buildings. On 7 April 1474, for example, Lord Hastings, the chamberlain of England, received a licence from Edward IV simultaneously to fortify with walls and battlements four sites (or possibly five) within his estates and create hunting parks of 2,000 or 3,000 acres beside each of them. It is very hard to see what work actually followed upon this extraordinarily ambitious grant. Confusingly, there were already castles on two of the sites – Bagworth (Leicestershire) and Slingsby (Yorkshire) – and there is no record of major alteration to either in this period. Meanwhile, his work to the other pair of manors mentioned – Ashby de la Zouch from 1472–3 and Kirby Muxloe in 1480, both in Leicestershire – respectively anticipated and followed the licence.²⁴

No less problematic than the use of these documents to date architectural projects is the categorisation of the buildings associated with them. It might be supposed that residences actually licensed as fortifications in the Middle Ages might be judged as castles by a scholarly tradition primarily concerned with defence as a yardstick of architectural title. This is not in fact the case. A building such as Oxburgh, for example, despite its licence and an impressive array of battlements (see pl. 302), has not been deemed truly defensible by modern scholars. As a result it has not conventionally been entitled a castle.



It is the deliberate intention of the definition of a castle proposed in this book that such a judgement should be laid open to challenge. There is no record of what Oxburgh was actually called in the 1480s, but it makes no sense to divide this off from the tradition of castle building. The licence suggests that Sir Edward Bedingfeld saw fortifications as central to the character of his residence and his social identity. In a sense it is this understanding of the architectural trappings of fortification, not the quality of the defence they provided, that identify the castle.

THE SETTING OF CASTLES

Castles have never existed in isolation and to a limited degree this book must necessarily treat the features that were typical of their immediate landscape. Amongst the most architecturally prominent of these were the religious foundations – monasteries and colleges of secular priests – that grew up in the shadow of every great residence in the Middle Ages, whether a castle or not. These served two principal functions. In an age that acknowledged the direct intervention of God in human affairs, such foundations were spiritual resources, their prayers of direct benefit to the living and the dead. They were also instruments of political advertisement, indicating by their architecture and decoration the wealth and power of the family that patronised them.

These two functions were complementary in many ways, but especially with regard to the dead. Both before and after the Reformation, the churches associ-

3 (facing page, left) Athelstan, king of Wessex (reigned 925–39), grants special liberties to St John of Beverley (d. 721) and his church, Beverley Minster, Yorkshire. Athelstan allegedly visited the tomb of the saint at Beverley before the battle of Brunanburh and became a patron of the church in thanksgiving for his victory. The text of the charter reads in rugged English: 'Als fre[e] make I the[e]; As he[a]rt may thynke; Or egh [eye] may see.' The panel is of uncertain late medieval date and was heavily repainted in the seventeenth century. It is first recorded as hanging at the entrance to the choir, the liturgical heart of the church.

4 (facing page, right) The brass and enamel charter of the 1380s displayed over the gate of Cooling, Kent (see pl. 235). It is portrayed as open or 'patent', with the seal of the builder, John, third Lord Cobham (d. 1408), appended on a string of silk. The text is in English and boasts of the value of the castle to the country. It reads: 'Knouwyth that beth and schul be; That I am mad in help of the cuntre; In knowyng of whyche thyng; Thys is chartre and wytnessing.' Lord Cobham received a royal licence to fortify the castle in 1381.

ated with great residences served as dynastic mausolea. The gathering of dead generations of a family within a church was not only desirable in social and religious terms, it also served an important didactic function. By their memorials, effigies and coats of arms, these collections of tombs illustrated in physical form the illustrious descent and alliances of the family they celebrated. Such collections survive today in considerable numbers, often when the house or castle that they attended upon has long since wasted away. But where the alliance of residence and church is still apparent – as at Warwick – the modern visitor can still be impressed by the human face of the past. Indeed, there are few more immediate ways of appreciating the historic population of a great residence and their dynastic claims than by encountering them, face to face, in imperious and silent effigy amongst their ancestors.

Castles also had an associated economic and physical landscape. Though the precise form of this varied over time it typically comprised three elements. First,

there was the estate that sustained the castle; second, as a section of this, a park (or parks) over which the owning magnate had rights of hunting; and third, there might be a settlement or borough, which developed under the fortifications or within their embrace. It is one reflection of the integration of the castle within the landscape that the massive destruction of castles in the aftermath of the Civil War was not simply an assault on potential military strongholds. In many cases their demolition or slighting was more thoroughly malicious, encompassing not merely fortifications but all the attendant symbols of lordship, including parkland and fishponds. Such actions were part of the disgrace and overthrow of a whole social order, a secular counterpart to the Dissolution of the Monasteries. There was nothing inevitable about the ruin of castles such as Corfe, Kenilworth and Raglan in the 1640s, and their destruction must have seemed quite as surprising to contemporaries as the demolition of Buckingham Palace or the sack of Westminster and the Houses of Parliament would be to us.