

A Comparison of Two Castles

Berkeley and Farleigh Hungerford Castles reviewed

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The English medieval castle was introduced by Norman knights just before the Norman Conquest, when Edward the Confessor brought in Norman experts to plan and construct castles along the border of Wales to defend Herefordshire against the Welsh. Their numbers and strength were massively increased after the Conquest when William I encouraged his followers to build strongholds for themselves along the borders to contribute to the defence of his new realm.

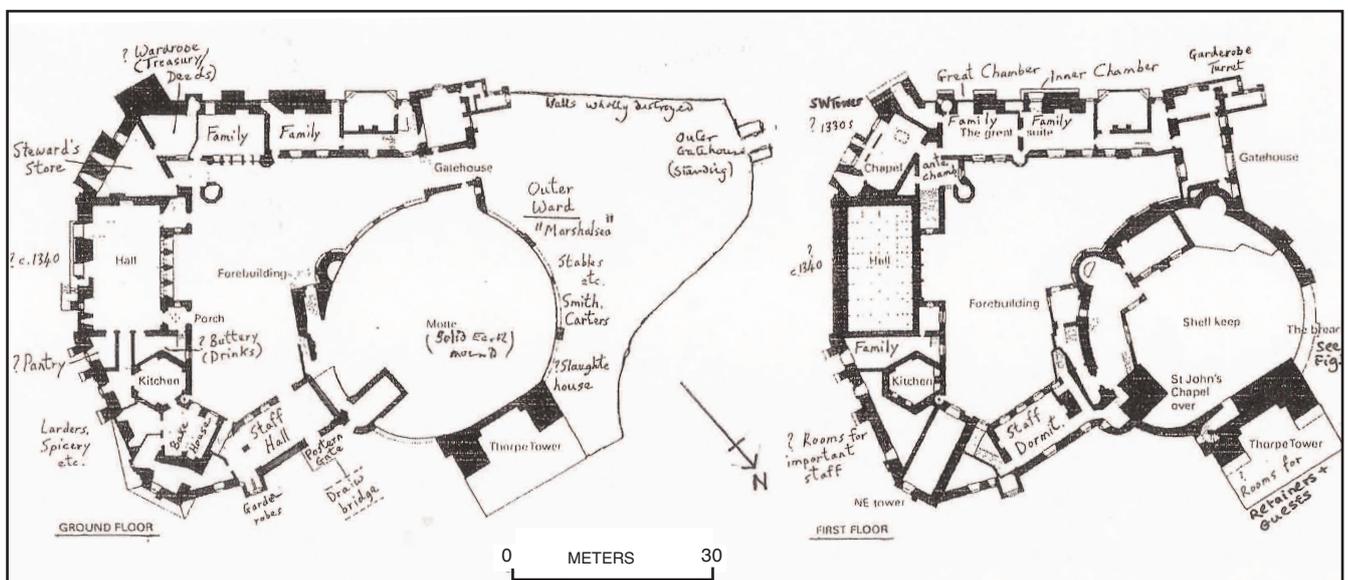
The earliest castles consisted of a heap of earth and rock (the motte) surrounded by a ditch (the moat) from which the spoil had been taken; the top of the motte was flattened, and a wooden stockade built around the edge of the flat area (the bailey). No doubt some wooden shelters quickly followed inside the stockade, and an enclosure at the foot of the mound for stabling, stores, etc., which would not fit inside the very small summit wall. This could be achieved in a couple of months or so; decades or centuries were then spent in elaborating the scheme in masonry, with ever higher central 'keeps' and ever more extensive outer enceintes.

Berkeley

Berkeley castle was constructed on the base of a motte, stockade, and bailey 'castellulum' by grant of a charter to Robert Fitzhardinge in 1117. The castle is built upon the southern end of an elevated spur of land which accommodates the town and the adjoining Minster church, and dominates the alluvial flood plain going down to the Severn. The site has water of some kind all around it, the Little Avon River to the south, and various ditches and rynes connected to the river on the other sides. Floodgate Farm 500m to the south is a revealing name, as also is Ham ('flat land in a river bend') 1km south. There are at least four moated sites along the flood-plain within 6km of Berkeley. It is said that the plain around the castle could be flooded at will for defence.

Exceptionally the plan for the masonry castle arranged for the massive shell completely to enclose the original earth mound so that the 'ground floor' is up a flight of stairs. The strongest part of the castle is a tower on the innermost side of this shell, entered from the eastern inner bailey up a narrow defended staircase. These stairs give access to a room whose floor is at the top of the original motte, and this room looks out on the raised enceinte (now a garden) within the shell walls. This room contains a deep semi-circular shaft (labelled 'dungeon') which must, I am sure, be the original well-shaft of the motte castle.

Figure 1
Plan Views of Berkeley Castle, ground floor on the left upper floor to the right



The east bailey has substantial buildings around it, which form a handsome residence whose dates run from 13th to 20th century. The emphasis was definitely on gracious living in later times, but the 'small drawing room' roof was stout enough to mount cannon in the Civil War.

The west bailey is reduced to a forecourt with a detached gatehouse, the wall and any other buildings having disappeared. Overlooking this forecourt is a large rectangular gap in the wall of the great shell. This was made by Parliamentary artillery in the course of a three day siege, and dramatically reveals the thickness of the shell-keep wall, and how quickly 17th century artillery could humble it.

With all its defences, by water and masonry, Berkeley was really just a well-secured house by the time of the Civil War. Its great weakness was the existence of ground of equal height or even dominant, belonging to the Minster, from where the Parliamentary artillery made this breach. Attempts to obtain this ground, in order to extend the circle of defence, failed; and in later centuries the Berkeley family wisely refrained from contentious internal politics, channelling any atavistic militarism into the Royal Navy, ever popular and non-threatening to landlocked villagers and politicians alike.

Farleigh Hungerford

Farleigh Castle is a good 200 years later than Berkeley, the first reference being in 1363 in a pardon to Sir Thomas Hungerford which forgives him for having built a castle without royal licence. It was constructed over the remains of a manor house previously the property of the de Montfort family. Thomas Hungerford was a wealthy and influential Wiltshire man (though since Farleigh Hungerford means ferny wood or woodland clearing, belonging to a family from poor land close to a ford, presumably his forebears came from poor land in Berkshire). He was chief administrator to John of Gaunt, and, according to a contemporary, rather a servile one. In his own right he was sheriff of Wiltshire, and MP for Wiltshire and Somerset, both many times.

To the north east and north west the castle has a dominant position above the river Frome and a small tributary stream, but to the south the ground rises markedly and dominates the castle site. One feels that the site was chosen for its convenience and its views rather than for defence.

The original castle was a rectangular space enclosed by a curtain wall with round projecting towers at each corner. The towers were built so as to enfilade every part of the curtain wall's outer face. Where the ground did not fall away naturally from the foot of the walls, there was a wide and deep trench which could in some parts be water-filled, with a sluice to release the water to the river Frome when it was not required for defence or dilution of the effluvia from the kitchens and garde-robes within the walls. The water constituted a useful obstacle to ground-level assault and, by raising the water-table just outside the wall, to undermining of the defences.

This plan was completely in accordance with the latest and most modish principles of fortification, but it could not overcome the fundamental objection of rising ground to the south. Gunpowder, absolutely unknown when Berkeley was planned, had now existed for most of a century, and guns were becoming useful. The next century saw new casting and boring techniques for gun barrels, the adoption of trunnions on the barrel for more effective elevation and range-ing, the use of mobile gun-carriages, and perhaps most important of all, the 'corning' of gunpowder to make the flame-spread in the charge more dependable. These developments were just beginning when Hungerford built his castle so it is perhaps unfair to blame him for lack of foresight.

However, the extension to the castle in the mid 15th century by Thomas' son Walter must have made it more vulnerable, rather than improved it. The semi-circular outer court which he added was encumbered by various non-military buildings such as the chapel and priest's house; and the new walls, while provided with bastion-towers enfilading the ditch in the approved fashion, were comparatively slight, and even more closely dominated by rising ground – a gift to any artillery officer from the 15th century onwards. The outer court would surely have fallen quickly to effective

artillery fire, and its walls would then have been a ready made assault base for the attackers. In fact the castle survived the Civil War without damage, having been surrendered by each side in turn to their opponents without fighting, perhaps a recognition that it was indefensible.

The two castles have similarities and differences. Both were used for imprisonment, Berkeley of a king, and Farleigh of a shamefully mistreated wife. Both were the scene of murder, Berkeley of the imprisoned king, Farleigh of a steward by his wife who afterwards married the castle's owner. Both castles suffered at the hands of recklessly improvident inheritors, and both were confiscated by the Crown and subsequently recovered by heirs. On the whole the Berkeley family comes over as much more attractive than the Hungerfords, accused at various times of child abuse and wife imprisonment. This might in part be due to the fact that the Berkeleys are still in possession of their castle, and have doubtless heavily influenced the writing of their castle's history.

The real difference however is that Berkeley was built as a serious, practical defensive device, which needed a siege-train to reduce it five centuries on, while Farleigh was an exhibition of conspicuous consumption, a show piece which never proved to be of defensive value.

Figure 3
Plan View Farleigh Hungerford Castle

