

Castles as Prisons
Richard Nevell



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Introduction

In the popular imagination of today's tourist, no castle is complete without a dark, dank 'dungeon' where prisoners were held in grim conditions. Some sites, such as Warwick Castle, play up to this perception to the point of misguided parody, but the truth behind this deliberate misconception is not so simple. David Cathcart King in *Castellarium Anglicanum*, outlining the various functions of castles, and under the category of practical uses, informs his reader that:

"not all castles were important enough, nor all lords' jurisdictions wide enough, to call for a prison; nor were all prisons specially designed. The normal guardrooms of the gate would make reasonably secure prisons for men in irons; nor was much ingenuity needed to turn a store-room into a dungeon, or to alter the comfortable chambers of the inner ward at the Tower of London so that their distinguished occupants could be locked inside them". He concludes "Castles made good prisons - not so much because a building hard to get into is necessarily hard to get out of - but because they could resist attempts at rescue".¹

It is a topic which has received relatively little attention; a survey of the summaries in *Medieval Archaeology* produced just five cases of medieval castles with obvious prisons spread across England, Scotland and Wales. Sidney Toy² and Stephen Friar³ provide good summaries of castle prisons in their respective works, but catch-all books run the risk of often over-generalising. 'Most castles probably had at least one custom-built prison' states one recent text.⁴ So can the examination of the material remains of castles and documentary sources offer any further insights into this often overlooked and sometimes misunderstood area?

Legal background and early prisons

When Alfred the Great collected the laws of England in the 9th century, imprisonment was used as a punishment for those who broke their

oath and culprits would be held at a royal manor. For most other offences a fine was usually preferred.⁵ Subsequent legislation provided that when a man could not pay a fine he would suffer imprisonment,⁶ though it was not a long-term measure.⁷ The king was the ultimate source of authority, as demonstrated by the fact Alfred instigated the collection of the laws, and this continued under the Normans.⁸ The situation was similar in Scotland, with fines preferred over imprisonment, and before the reign of David I there is little documentary evidence for the laws of Scotland; David was raised in England and gave titles to his Norman associates, linking the Scottish aristocracy with that of England for several generations. However, David's successors allowed the aristocracy increasing powers to exert their own authority in relation to enforcing the law.⁹

The Norman monarchy infrequently used imprisonment as a punishment, though the situation changed during the reign of Henry II. From an early stage, the potential of the newly built castles in England to act as prisons was evident. In 1071, Wallingford Castle, Berkshire was the scene for the Abbot of Abingdon's incarceration.¹⁰ Three decades later, the Tower of London held its first prisoner, Ranulf Flambard, coincidentally also a man of the church. In 1166, at the Assize of Clarendon, Henry II ordered his sheriffs to establish gaols in each county if one was not already present, stipulating they should be in "a borough or in some castle". Castles could often be centres of administration, and with boroughs being important settlements there is a clear link between prisons and the most significant places in a county. In the wake of the Assize of Clarendon, prisons were built in the boroughs of Aylesbury, Cambridge, Exeter, Huntingdon, Ilchester (Somerset), Lincoln, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Norwich, Northampton, Nottingham, and Oxford. Sums of between £2 and £5 were spent in 12 different counties; the small sums reflect the fact the king ordered that the gaols should be made from royal wood,¹¹ which would have been considerably cheaper to use as a building material than stone. The intention

was that these prisons would serve the entire county, so we should be cautious about interpreting rooms within early baronial castles as cells or prisons since during the 12th and 13th centuries, at least, they were likely to be located in the administrative centres of a county.

The later Assize of Northampton (1176) provided that if a prisoner could not be taken to a sheriff then they must be conveyed to the nearest castle, underlining the growing importance of castles as places of detention. At first this may seem to conflict with the conclusion that specially designed prisons were a rarity amongst castles, however it is likely that the nearest castle was chosen for a number of reasons, the presence of a structure purpose-built for holding people apart. By the nature of their construction, masonry castles were the most durable structures of the Middle Ages. Most rooms - particularly those used for storage - could be pressed into service to act as a prison, and a securely bound captive would be unlikely to escape. Furthermore, whilst castles were not permanently garrisoned, even a small body of guards would be able to look after a prisoner. The implication of the Assize of Northampton is that structures or rooms within castles could readily be used as prisons; however, such an *ad hoc* and temporary use is unlikely to have left its mark on the material record. The fact that the purpose-built prisons established after the Assize of Clarendon were timber structures also poses a problem in discerning the design and even position of such structures, since based on plan alone they may have appeared similar to other buildings.

The concept of imprisonment being used as a form of punishment developed during Henry II's reign, and it was decided that those who lied at a grand assize would suffer a year's imprisonment.¹² The 12th century chronicler Roger of Howden mentions that an assize of 1196, (issued by Richard I on 20 November) required that cities and county boroughs appointed inspectors to ensure that people accused of a crime were sent to prison while they awaited judgement by a royal justice.¹³

The Tower of London

The Tower of London, or rather the castle which now bears that name, was founded by William the Conqueror in 1066 though work on the eponymous stone tower did not begin until about 1078.¹⁴ In 1100, Ranulf Flambard, Bishop of Durham, was imprisoned in the White Tower.¹⁵ Great towers in general were buildings which served a range of purposes: military, ceremonial, symbols of lordship, domestic and administrative, not given over to a single purpose.¹⁶ In Oliver Creighton's words "The psychosocial impact of the immense White Tower on London's late 11th century cityscape must have been even more pronounced given the rather unimpressive appearance of the Saxon palace of Westminster".¹⁷ If the Tower was exclusively a residential royal palace-fortress, designed to intimidate and awe spectators would this have been compatible with it being used as a prison?

Perhaps one of the reasons the Tower was used for confinement lies in the status of the prisoner. Whilst Flambard was "widely detested as a low-born, self-important, over-mighty upstart and was particularly offensive to churchmen",¹⁸ he was still regarded as a member of an elite ruling class. On 15 August, 1100, Henry I charged him with misusing funds and the result was Flambard was held in the White Tower, thus becoming its first prisoner. He evidently spent his captivity in comfort, and according to Orderic Vitalis received from the king two shillings a day for food and drink. A plan for his escape was put in motion and a rope was smuggled into his room, hidden in a flagon of wine. While the guards were sleeping off copious amounts of wine, Flambard lowered himself out of his window and met his accomplices below.¹⁹ He thus became the first prisoner to escape confinement in the Tower of London and would not be the last.²⁰

The episode highlights the problem of using a comfortable, nominally residential building to hold someone captive. Flambard was apparently not a slim man, yet the windows were large enough for him to pass through. Though Flam-



Fig 1. *The White Tower in the 15th century, as depicted in an illuminated folio in a manuscript of poems by Charles, Duke of Orléans (1391-1465) commemorating his imprisonment there (British Library, MS Royal, 16 folio 73).*

bard had a rope, it was too short and left him with a drop that “almost flattened him and made him groan with pain”.²¹ One end of the rope was tied to the dividing colonette in the window, possibly indicating Flambard’s rooms were on the second floor (fig. 1).²² Certainly the need for a rope would indicate the bishop was not held at ground floor level, while the access to facilities for banqueting suggests he was in a high-status area of the great tower. Contemporary sources do not comment on how the White Tower was used, so the purpose of each room must be deduced from its form and layout. The second floor contains what is likely to be a hall and a private chamber.²³ If Flambard was held here, he would have been occupying the highest status rooms in the castle, and the account of Orderic Vitalis suggests he was next to a hall where he could hold feasts. From a security point of view, the best place to hold a prisoner here would be in the undercroft. The windowless crypt of the Chapel of St John with only one point of access²⁴ would also have been suited to

the task; however its position underneath the chapel may have precluded it from such use. Rather than holding Flambard in a secure chamber or creating one for him, he was placed in surroundings that fitted his status. This approach to detaining people would not be detectable in the fabric of a building. In the first century after the Norman Conquest, imprisonment was usually on a temporary basis, therefore it may be expected that special arrangements were not made. This is probably part of the reason Flambard was able to escape.

Identifying and locating prisons

‘Feature Analysis’ has been infrequently applied to castles. However the method has the potential to inform and formalise the identification of particular room types. The decision tree created by James R. Mathieu was developed by a combination of analysing features of rooms, which were documented to have a particular function, and inductive reasoning. The criteria that he developed for identifying a prison was that the room would have 1: poor lighting 2: a single point of access, 3: not contain a fireplace. These factors combine to make a room secure. For Mathieu though, prisons were physically indistinguishable from storage rooms, and they were therefore grouped together.²⁵ This approach should also encourage caution when interpreting the use of a particular room. Such criteria are best invoked for identifying purpose-built prisons, as opposed to cases such as the Tower of London where high-status accommodation was used in a fashion its builders did not intend. Toy cautions that store rooms have often been interpreted as prisons; however, even some of those examples he cites as prisons have since been reconsidered and revised, illustrating that new approaches to the role of castles have changed perceptions of room function.²⁶ Whilst Toy and, four decades later, Emery²⁷ both considered a basement room in Warkworth Castle’s great tower to be a prison dungeon, or *oubliette*, as it is accessed only from its vaulted roof, Peter Brears, 2011, suggests it was a floor safe and the room above it was an accounting room, an interpretation also acknowledged by John Goodall.²⁸



Fig 2. Warkworth Castle. Ground floor of the Great Tower (1390s). Hatch in the floor of the 'accounting room', leading to the vaulted safe or strong room below.

Both the Historic Environment Record and the HMSO, 1981, guidebook for the 13th century round tower at Bronllys Castle, Brecknockshire, suggest that the tower basement was used for either storage or as a prison cell. This is apparently based on the fact that: a) it could only be accessed through a hatch or trap-door in the window recess, above steps leading down into the basement, and b) there is an 8 ft drop to the floor at the base of the steps, thus requiring some moveable wooden steps that could be withdrawn. G T Clark also suspected that there may at one time have been a latrine and drain.²⁹ Using Mathieu's decision tree, either use is reasonable. However, the *Appendix* to this article shows that in many cases the site of a prison was unknown. In addition to the Tower of London, Guildford's 1130s great tower is also documented as being used as a prison, though this was a conversion of around 1202.³⁰ Therefore, it can be tentatively suggested that whilst the basement of Bronllys Castle could have been adapted for use as a prison, it was probably more likely to have been intended as storage. With the castle's finest accommodation in the

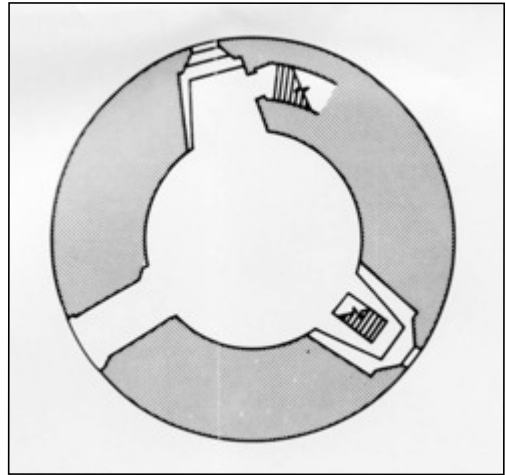


Fig 3. Bronllys Castle, c. 1220-30. First floor. Steps (top), covered by a hatch, within and to the right of the window embrasure, leading to the basement.

two floors above, complete with garderobes and fireplaces, it might be expected that some effort would be made to keep prisoners apart from the inner household.

Possible clues that Mathieu does not cover is the presence and location of a drawbar and the inclusion, in most cases, of a latrine. A drawbar on the *exterior* of a room would have clearly prevented escape. The twin D-shaped towers of the gatehouse at Pevensey Castle have basements with restricted access. The basement of the south tower was secured with a drawbar on the outside, and this has been taken as evidence that the room was used to hold captives.³¹ Whilst a locking system of this type reflects some form of control over access, it is not always clear who was being kept in, or out. At Barnard Castle (Co. Durham) the early 13th century Round Tower was connected and adjacent to the Great Chamber, with a heavy drawbar on the side of the Great Chamber, giving whoever was in the Great Chamber control over access to the Round Tower. Philip Davis has suggested that whilst the Round Tower provided high-status accommodation, this arrangement allowed John de Balliol, the builder of the castle, to control access to his family.³²



Fig. 4. Skipton Castle. Vaulted space directly below the gate-passage. Draw bar slot to right. The vaulted roof is a later insertion.

The twin-towered gatehouse at Skipton Castle, Yorkshire, which was probably built between 1190 and 1220,³³ has a (now vaulted) basement level chamber directly under the gate-passage, the entry to which was barred on the outside (fig. 4). However Derek Renn considered that as a long term prison, the windowless, air-less, latrine-less basement room would have been impractical.³⁴ The near-contemporary but fragmentary gatehouse at Bolingbroke Castle, Lincolnshire, took a similar form, with two D-shaped towers and a chamber underneath the gate-passage (figs. 5, 7). M. W. Thompson tentatively suggested that this might be a prison as it would have been too damp for storage. The basement chambers beneath the gatehouses at Skipton and Bolingbroke probably served the same purpose. Whereas they could have been pressed into used as prisons for short periods, functioning as a drawbridge pit seems more likely. There is always a temptation to link prisons with gatehouses. Newgate prison



Fig. 5. Bolingbroke Castle, Lincolnshire. The interpretation of the gatehouse and access bridge from the current on-site information panel. © English Heritage.

in London is perhaps the most famous example in England, and Norman Pounds offers some examples of gatehouses being re-purposed as prisons later in their history.³⁵ The result is that sometimes it can be tempting to see a prison in a gatehouse where other explanations may be more likely.

At William Marshal's Pembroke Castle one of the mural towers of the inner ward, perhaps built by one of his sons, not long after Beeston and Bolingbroke, has been identified as a 'Prison Tower' (c. 1230s-40s). This name is based on a 1331 source but there is no indication that it may have been the tower's original use. The plan of the castle, reproduced in the RCAHMW Inventory for Pembrokeshire, indicates an embrasure at basement or ground floor level overlooking the ditch outside the curtain of the inner ward. There are no stairs down to this level, no latrine and today there is a hatch in the modern wooden floor that gives access to it (figs. 8, 9).³⁶

Between 1166 and 1230, prisons were established in the royal castles of Bedford, Carlisle, Chester, Chichester, Colchester, Gloucester, Guildford, Launceston, Lincoln, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Oxford, Shrewsbury, Wallingford, and Worcester.³⁷ So can any prison buildings or



Fig. 6. St. Briavel's Castle. Detail of the gatehouse from a drawing by S & N Buck, 1732.

cells be identified at these sites? The *Pipe Rolls* record the cost of building a gaol at Chichester Castle; however in 1217 the castle was demolished by Philip d'Aubigny.³⁸ As a result, there are no traces to indicate which building the gaol was. Bedford Castle suffered a similar fate in 1224 after its owner rebelled against Henry III and only its motte survives today.³⁹ The remains of Colchester, Gloucester, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Shrewsbury, Wallingford and Worcester offer little information in this context. Of the six, only Colchester has significant remains above ground and extrapolating from Peter Brears' point about gatehouses in the late 14th century, it would be unlikely that the great tower was originally intended to hold prisoners as well as provide accommodation, although keeps were certainly relegated to this function later in their life. The Surrey *Victoria County History* suggests that the county gaol at Guildford was located in the great tower, a purpose for which it was not originally designed, but, as with the Tower of London, it was pressed into service.⁴⁰ When the castle was founded is uncertain, but architecturally the great tower is thought to date from the early 12th century.⁴¹ Like Colchester, it is highly unlikely the tower was built with the intention of securely housing captives. Though Carlisle, Lincoln, and Oxford have significant masonry remains above ground, they have been continually reworked over the centuries and no

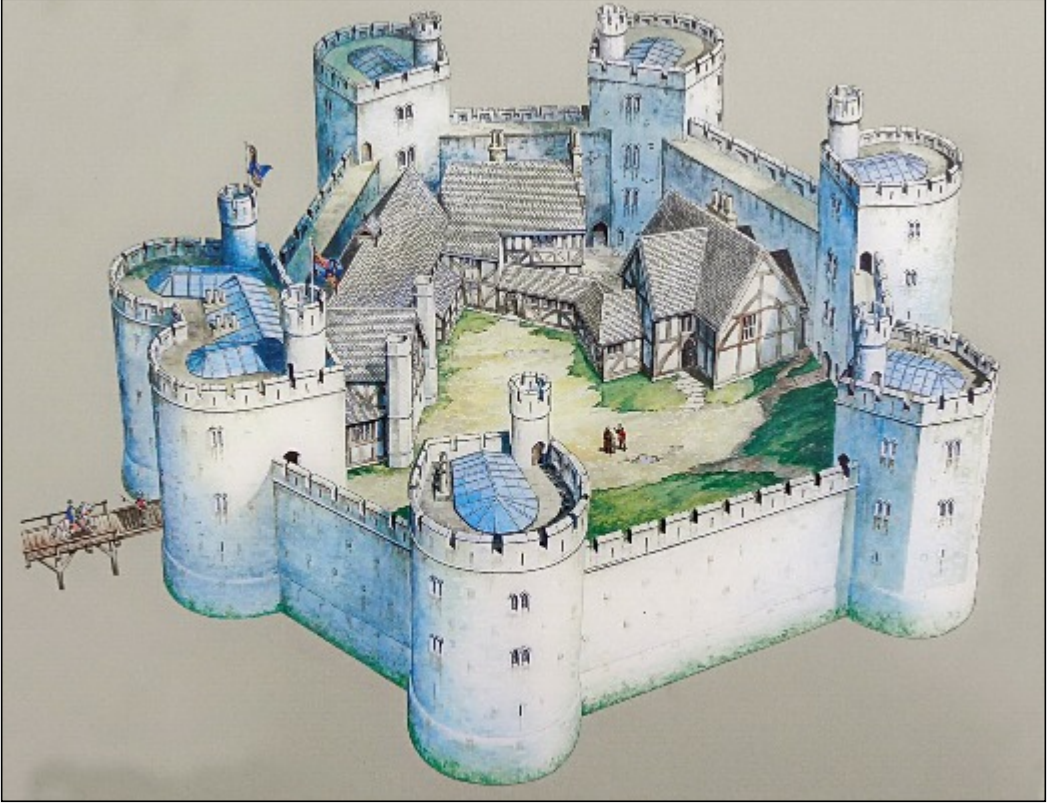
longer betray signs of any medieval 12th or 13th century purpose-built prison buildings. Searching for a prison where one has been documented can lead unwary investigators astray. In the 1880s an underground chamber was discovered within the gatehouse of **St Briavel's Castle**, Gloucestershire (fig. 6). The circular room measured 3.2m in diameter and a notice in the *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeology Society* declared not only that it was a dungeon but considered that it "must have been a gruesome place". The editor included a rather more prosaic endnote: "It was probably a store-room".⁴²

In addition to the Tower of London, Lydford, and Guildford, Goodrich Castle was documented in the 14th century as being fitted out to hold prisoners.⁴³ In this case a chamber abutting the east side of the 12th century keep was either purpose-built in the 14th century or an existing room was modified. The masonry construction of the narrow entrance is of noticeably poorer quality than the great tower itself (figs. 10, 11). Interestingly, the approach to the cell has a sequence of two doors, both with draw-bars on the outside with an 'airlock' space between, preventing those on the inside from leaving even when the final, inner door was opened.⁴⁴ At Barnard Castle it has been noted that the locking bar marked the lord's control over access to his family, but in the case of Goodrich, the differing quality of the cell suggests it was a much lower status area, making its use as a place of detention, most likely, perhaps for prisoners of war. The prison itself, partly below both the level of the courtyard and the basement of the keep, measured 2.45m by 6m. The fact that the floor is essentially a rubble bedrock surface gives the impression that the room was not meant to be comfortable.⁴⁵

Use of the term 'dungeon'

The term *dungeon* has been used sparingly here. However it is interesting to consider its shared derivation with *donjon*. The earliest recorded use of 'dungeon' in the English language dates from the 14th century when it had the same meaning as *donjon*, a Middle French word.

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ABOVE: Fig. 7. Bolingbroke Castle. View of the compact cluster of D-shaped towers typical of the period. Artist's reconstruction as it may have appeared in the C15. Image from the on-site display panel.

BELOW: Figs. 8, 9. Pembroke Castle. The early-mid C13 'Prison Tower' of the Inner Ward. Left: Grille hatch to basement. Right: basement. Limited light, but no latrine and no permanent stairs.





Fig. 10. Goodrich Castle. The narrow C14 entrance to the prison cell adjacent to and east of the keep. Two successive doors, both with draw-bars, controlled entry.

Whilst *dungeon* evolved to mean a “dark, damp room [which] was used as a cell for the confinement or prisoners”, *donjon* preserved its original meaning: that of a castle’s great tower or keep. Both are thought to come from the medieval Latin *dominio*, meaning “lord”,⁴⁶ emphasising that both were a form of control over others. Some great towers, such as Lancaster,⁴⁷ Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Oxford, later became used as prisons. The changing use of these structures, as they became less fashionable for domestic use, may offer a clue to the differences between *donjon* and *dungeon*. A survey of Launceston Castle from 1337 offers a tantalising glimpse, noting that there was “a gaol badly and inadequately covered with lead, and another prison called ‘the Larder’ weak and almost useless”.⁴⁸ The survey does not indicate the location of the prisons, however the text can be divided into three parts: first the domestic rooms (halls, accommodation, chapels, and kitchen) are described, then the prisons, and then the towers and walls. This implies a spatial disconnect between residential areas of a castle and the loca-



Fig. 11. Goodrich Castle. Interior of the late C13 or C14 prison cell with the lower courses of the keep wall to the right.

tion where prisoners were held. As we will see, this may not have been the case elsewhere.

Scotland, pit prisons and *oubliettes*

The nature of castle prisons in Scotland has a different signature compared to those commonly found in England and Wales. While many south of the border were often *ad hoc* or have left little physical trace, Scotland’s prisons are usually easier to determine. The reason for this is the ‘pit prison’, often without light and accessed only from the top via a hatch or trap door. In Scottish castles built with such prisons (sometimes referred to as ‘bottle dungeons’), they would usually occupy the lowest two floors of a tower.⁴⁹ If there were two prison levels the pit prison would occupy the lower level, and above would be a room equipped for comparatively more comfortable confinement. Chris Tabraham, echoing W. M. Mackenzie, suggests this may have represented a social divide in the use of prisons: the pit would have been used for ‘serfs’ while the chamber above held freemen rather than reflecting the nature

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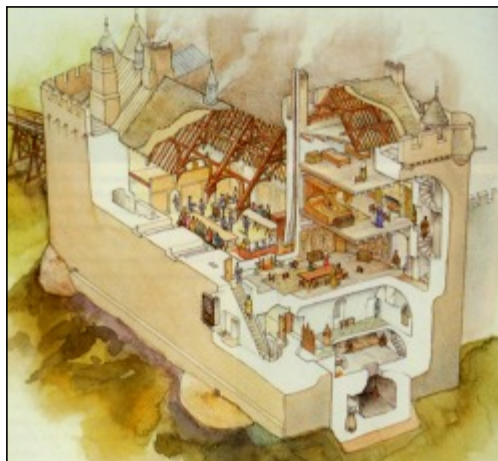


Fig. 12. Dirleton Castle. The Halyburton hall block. The pit prison or 'laigh' under the upper prison c. 1450. Image © Historic Scotland.



Fig. 13. Dirleton Castle. The upper prison with hatch entry to lower prison to the right of the picture.

of the crime.⁵⁰ Given the difference in conditions between noble prisoners and common prisoners already demonstrated, this seems more than likely. Where these pit prisons are found, they appear to be purpose-built rather than adaptations, as demonstrated by the provision of a latrine, albeit not necessarily a universal feature (fig. 14).

At Dirleton Castle, East Lothian, there was a purpose-built prison beneath the chapel (figs. 12, 13). Dating from the 14th century the prison consisted of two parts, a chamber for freemen and a pit prison below. The pit prison has the hallmarks of a storage room; it is poorly lit (in fact, without light at all) and restricted access. Conditions would have been abominable; the room measured just over 3m square.⁵¹ However, what marks the room out as one intended for people rather than objects was the provision of a privy. As W. M. Mackenzie noted: 'Such a place was, in most cases, provided with a latrine and a ventilating shaft, but no other lighting'.⁵² Hailes Castle, East Lothian, has a pit prison similarly equipped with a garderobe and accessed only from the vaulted roof.⁵³ The pit prison at Dundonald, Ayrshire, meanwhile, measures 1.9m by 3.3m with no garderobe; the chamber above it benefited from a fireplace,

with a latrine. A slot for a drawbar indicates this room could be barred from outside.⁵⁴ The reconstruction of Crookston Castle, Lanarkshire, in stone took place around 1400, and like the previous examples mentioned had a pit prison. The ground floor of the north-east tower was occupied by a room measuring 2m by 2.8m and was accessed solely by a hatch in the roof.⁵⁵ The tower houses of Cardoness and Borthwick both date from the 15th century and contain pit prisons. Like Hailes and Dirleton, Borthwick's pit had a garderobe built in (fig. 14).⁵⁶

Prisons in castle gatehouses

In his discussion of gatehouses in northern England during the 14th century, Peter Brears challenges the usual, popular, interpretation of basement or below-ground chambers in gatehouses as prisons. The smell emanating from an occupied prison would have been overpowering, and could have rendered the building uninhabitable. This contrasts starkly with the examples mentioned from Scotland which happen to fall around the same time; Crookston's prison was next to the entrance passage; at Dundonald it was deeper inside the castle and adjacent to the lower hall; at Borthwick's was below the kitchens; at Huntly (Aberdeenshire) it was beneath the steward's chamber. In gener-

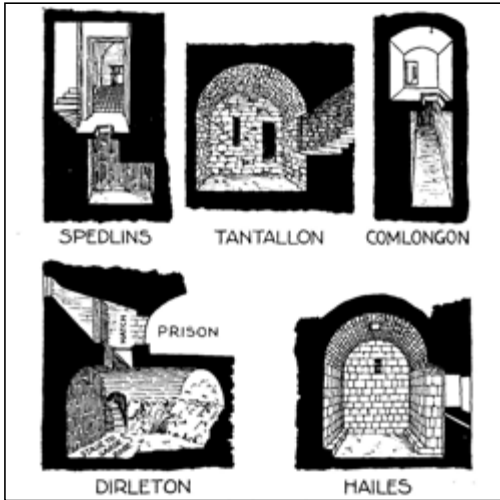


Fig. 14. Various types of 'pit' prisons in Scottish castles. From W M Mackenzie, 1927, p. 106.

al though, tower houses had their private quarters on the upper floors, while the lower floors were service areas, reserved for kitchens, storage, and in this case prisons.⁵⁷ In tower houses with many levels this may have been less of an issue; Borthwick for instance had seven storeys and Cardoness six. Gatehouses were rarely this tall. As a result of Brears' reinterpretation of gatehouses in northern England, the notion that the underground chamber in Cockermouth Castle's outer gatehouse (Cumberland) was used as a prison has been dispelled and replaced with the plausible theory that it was a storage room for valuables.⁵⁸ Brears' work has started to re-open interpretations of chambers previously thought of as prisons, as can be seen in the most recent guidebook for Kidwelly Castle. This was referenced in the paper on Brougham Castle's double gatehouse in *CSG Journal* 26, and the revised guidebook by John Kenyon now suggests that the underground chamber in the outer gatehouse was a strong room.⁵⁹ The overall effect is to potentially muddy the waters, as even a drawbar will not be proof alone of the presence of a prison cell. Instead, such features must be taken in the context of their surroundings. If a drawbar is found in structures providing accommodation close by, they are unlikely to have been used for prisoners. Such examples date from later

on in the castle story, and may reflect the increasing domestication of the castle in England.

Purpose-built prisons - England & Wales

In the 1170s Henry II keep at Newcastle upon Tyne, a chamber in the south-west corner of the basement, adjacent to the Garrison room, was originally accessible only by descending a staircase in the south-east corner tower; with garderobe and drawbar it may be construed as an early purpose-built low-status prison. It is not a typical pit prison as it had some lighting and was a similar size to other chambers in the basement. Neil Guy suggests that a small room in the north-west tower, two floors above the possible basement prison, and at Great Hall level, may have provided confinement for higher-status prisoners. The small nature of the room might indicate storage of some sort, but a garderobe in the room indicates that it may have been intended for someone to spend considerable time there.⁶⁰

One of the most interesting examples of a late purpose-built prison chamber in England is found at Warwick Castle. Caesar's Tower dates from the mid 14th century and was probably built by Thomas Beauchamp the elder, earl of Warwick (figs. 15-17).⁶¹ The vaulted prison basement was isolated from the floors above, and could only be accessed from the courtyard. It was provided with a latrine, demonstrating it was intended from the start for permanent use, whilst a gallery with a window onto the basement cell protected by a grille allowed guards to check on prisoners without entering the cell (fig. 17).⁶² Whilst the pit prisons of Scotland are very small, the chamber in Caesar's Tower is comparatively spacious, measuring 4m by 5.7m. Even so, this is much smaller than the internal measurements of Lydford Castle's tower - 9.4m by 9.1m internally. The south range of Newark Castle, built by the bishops of Lincoln at the end of the 13th century has four chambers identified with 'oubliettes', but most were probably strong rooms added when this range was completed in the early 14th century (figs. 18, 19).⁶³ Pit prisons are also mentioned at York (1360), Leicester (1411), and possibly Nottingham (1532), as noted by Pugh.⁶⁴



Fig. 15. Warwick. Caesar's Tower. Mid C15. Entrance to the purpose-built prison from the courtyard.

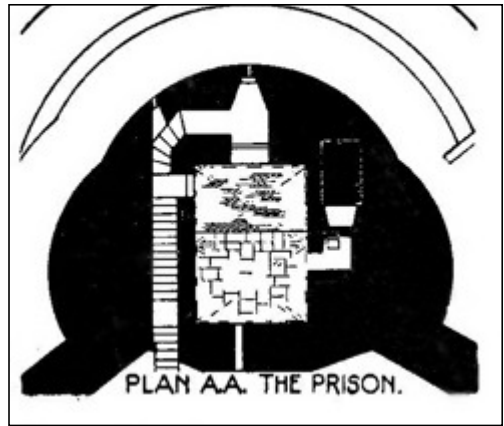


Fig. 16. Warwick. Plan of prison basement. From Sidney Toy, 1953, p. 204, clearly showing the latrine on the right.

Aristocratic and common prisoners

Arrangements varied according to the subject's status. As noted above, Bishop Flambard lived in relative comfort, and such treatment of society's elite is not uncommon. In the autumn of 1174 King William of Scotland was captured by Henry II of England and taken to Falaise in Normandy where he was confined within the castle's *donjon*.⁶⁵ It is likely that one of the reasons Henry chose not to imprison William in England is that his control of Normandy at that time was firmer. However, the choice of location is significant. As the birthplace of William the Conqueror it had a distinguished history, the great tower dating from the early 12th century.⁶⁶ The large stone-built structure was an imposing statement of lordship, fit for a king and a dignified holding place for William. The Scottish king was still at Falaise in December 1174 when he agreed to the Treaty of Falaise, in which he and his descendants were made liegemen of the English crown.⁶⁷ Before that, Duke Robert of Normandy was imprisoned at Corfe Castle from 1106/7; it is assumed the duke, who challenged Henry I for the crown of England, was held in luxurious accommodation, and consequently it has been suggested that the great tower would have fulfilled this function.⁶⁸ Completed around this time, it could have been adapted for this use much like the White Tower had been.

When Henry of Lancaster captured King Edward II in 1326 the latter was conveyed to Kenilworth Castle where he was held captive.⁶⁹ There may have been a conscious link with the history of the site: between June and December 1266 the garrison supporting the rebellious Simon de Montfort held the castle against a siege begun by Henry III. The king could not force his way into the castle, but with little hope of relief the defenders came to terms.⁷⁰ Where Edward II was imprisoned in the castle is unclear. Kenilworth is almost a palatial complex, and if the previous examples can be taken as any indication it is likely that the king was given reasonably comfortable accommodation. He was later conveyed to Berkeley Castle where he died in prison (fig. 20). There are similar problems regarding Criccieth Castle, first mentioned in 1239 when Gruffydd ap Llywelyn was imprisoned by his half-brother, the heir of the prince of Wales.⁷¹ The late Richard Avent suggested the S-E Tower as the possible place of Gruffydd's confinement, at the same time proposing that the tower provided accommodation for the Welsh princes. Both explanations are plausible and reflect that high-status captives could expect lenient treatment. Whilst the elite were held in relative comfort befitting their status, commoners could hope for less favourable surroundings and it is instructive to draw on an example from outside England.

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Fig. 17. Warwick. The sign by the grille reads: 'Rebuilt to house the prisoners taken at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356, this tower and its dungeon long outlived its purpose. Drained by the open gully in the floor, ventilated by one small shaft and hardly lit at all it is chilling to learn, from inscriptions on the walls, that prisoners were sometimes confined on these conditions for many years'.

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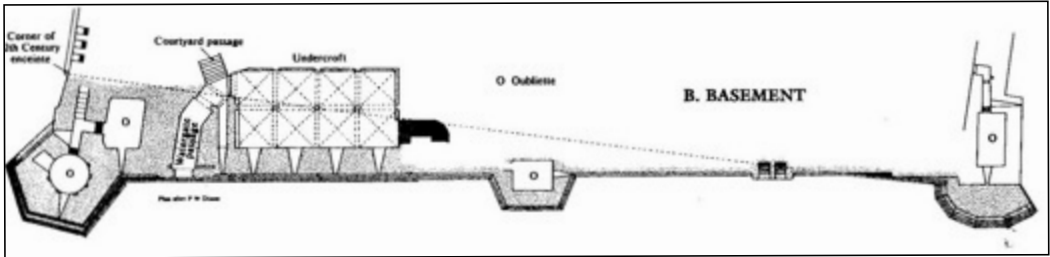


Fig. 18. Newark. Basement plan of the early C14 South range showing 4 oubliettes. Detail of fig. 20 taken from the 'Guardian of the North - The Story of Newark Castle' © Newark Castle Trust, 1997.



LEFT: Fig. 19. Newark. Basement plan of the early C14 South range showing 4 oubliettes.

Writing in 1181, Lambert of Ardes recounted the conditions found with the tower at the Château de Tournehem, owned by Count Baldwin II of Guines. Amongst the details he provides he mentions "in the tower, or rather underneath it, he buried a prison in the deep abyss of the earth, [reached] through certain secret drawbridges in the foundation. It was like a hell-pot to terrify guilty wretches and, to speak more truthfully, to punish".⁷² As was the case in England, the prison was based in the lord's seat of power.⁷³ Little is known about the form of the timber structures used to imprison common criminals in the Middle Ages. They were transient buildings, regularly needing repair. Ralph Pugh suggests that when located within a castle, timber could be used because the stone curtain walls provided the main security. When the castle's permanent structures were used to hold people, they often took the form of political prisoners.⁷⁴ Similarly, little about conditions in prisons can be gleaned from contemporary sources, but the *Pipe Rolls* frequently detail expenditure on irons (*ferramenta*) to hold prisoners.

Divisions between prisoners of differing status is illustrated by the case of London. In the 13th century it had three prisons: Fleet, for civil trespassers, Newgate for felons, and the Tower, reserved for state prisoners. The division was not always rigidly adhered to, but it shows that as castles were the highest-status buildings in England - and the most secure - they were used to hold the most important prisoners. Newgate prison was particularly notorious, and fits neatly within Mathieu's decision tree. The accounts of the 14th and 15th centuries paint a picture of a dark, fetid place, where jail fever was a threat to prisoners who often could not afford food.⁷⁵ It has perhaps coloured the popular imagination. When commoners were held within prisons at castles their experience differed greatly to the confinement of nobles held by their peers. In this case such prisoners were of great financial and political value and the maintenance of their health was paramount.

Princess Eleanor of Brittany, the daughter of Henry II spent 40 years in imprisonment. As befitted royalty, she was kept in reasonably comfortable conditions, demonstrated by orders to build a new fireplace in her quarters at Gloucester Castle in 1238.⁷⁶ Another royal figure who suffered imprisonment was Mary Queen of Scots, in the latter half of the 16th century. She was held captive for 19 years at: Lochleven, Tutbury, Carlisle, Bolton, Sheffield, and finally Fotheringhay where she was put on trial and executed. Fotheringhay had been used as a royal prison since the late 13th century;



Fig. 20. Berkeley. The room above the forebuilding entrance leading to the shell keep, where, it is claimed, Edward II was held captive in 1327. He died at Berkeley in the same year. Edward was kept in the custody of Mortimer's brother-in-law, Thomas Berkeley, who was given £5 a day for Edward's maintenance.

unfortunately, the castle was demolished in the 17th century and only earthworks remain.⁷⁷ Her treatment at Carlisle shows that Mary was accustomed to comfortable surroundings, and would have occupied appropriate accommodation. She occupied the Warden's Tower in the inner ward, reserved for those in charge of the castle, and was attended by her household.⁷⁸

Conclusion

When castles remained in use into the modern era, it was frequently as a state prison. Lancaster Castle was until very recently still used in this manner and Chester, Norwich, Lincoln, Leicester, Carmarthen were likewise adapted to modern demands.⁷⁹ As the military and residential aspects of castles diminished, their role as centres for punishment grew, arguably colouring later perceptions. The title of Neil Ludlow's new book on the royal castle of Carmarthen, *Carmarthen Castle – The Archaeology of Government*, seems entirely appropriate; a prison was recorded here in 1331 in a mural tower that had been built in the 1240s.⁸⁰ The Tower of London itself, became a notorious prison in the 17th century (fig. 21). Most baronial castles did not have purpose-built prisons and, as a general rule, it was only the

most important castles in England that were used as such, often acting as gaols for entire counties. For the first century after the Norman Conquest, purpose-built prisons in castles were very few in number, and whilst the 1166 Assize of Clarendon ordered their construction, the sums spent indicate they were generally timber structures, described by Pugh as approaching 'cages'.⁸¹ We should therefore be cautious how we identify prisons. There are features which might indicate a room could have been used to hold prisoners, but the location should be considered. Is it likely that elite accommodation and confinement for commoners or local offenders would have been housed in close proximity within a castle? And assumptions that when a prison is mentioned it must have been in the great tower should be challenged. However, when castle keeps became unfashionable and redundant as residences it was easy to convert rooms for new uses.

Whilst historical records contain numerous instances of high-status prisoners held captive, we hear little of common prisoners. There would have been a stark contrast between this class segregation of prisoners as demonstrated by the pit prison in Dirleton Castle, or the conditions implied by the expenditure on irons in the *Pipe*

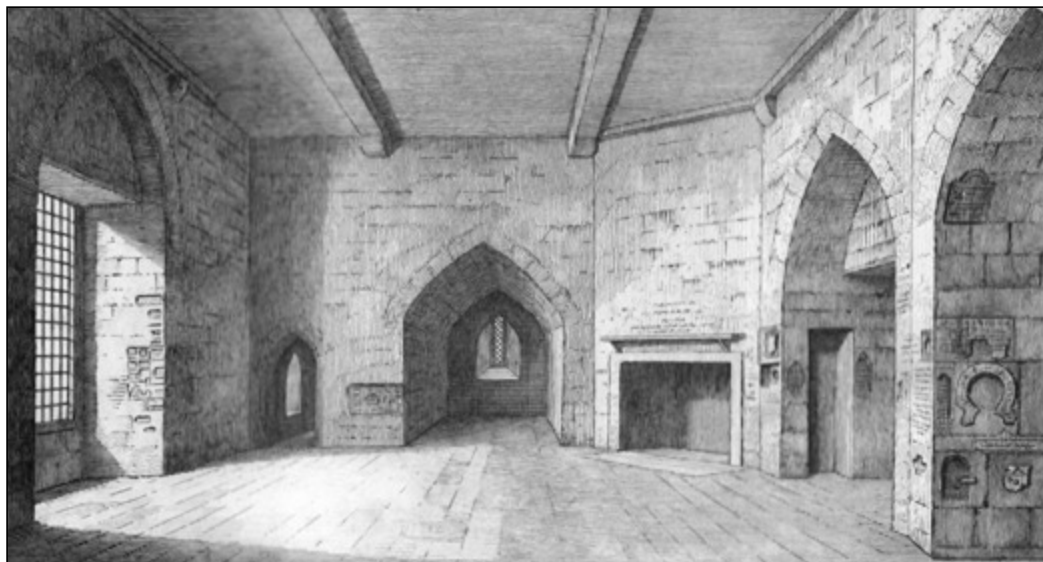


Fig. 21. The Tower of London. The Prison Room in the 13th century Beauchamp Tower. From John Bayley, 'The History and Antiquities of the Tower of London', 1830. Prisoners included Sir Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel - held for 10 years and died a prisoner. Lord Cobham spent the last 14 years of his life here and in 1553, Robert Dudley, Elizabeth I's childhood sweetheart, was imprisoned here.

Rolls compared to the luxury that the nobility could expect in their confinement. The fact pit prisons were common in Scotland is indicative of the difference in castle cultures between the two countries, and may reflect the different structures of power, with the baronial classes in Scotland having more rights to enforce the law than their English counterparts. When imprisoned, the elite were generally confined in accommodation befitting their status, so it can be deduced that the timber structures of the 12th century were generally intended for the general population. Princes and lords might be expected to be treated with dignity, while their lowly counterparts would be bound and chained.

The image of the castle as a grim prison has endured. The 19th century prisons in Leicester - and many other places were modelled to look like castles, with battlements, towers and gatehouses. This popular link was perpetuated by the fantastic stories that have grown around the Tower of London.⁸² From there the view of castles as damp, dark places of detention and torture has

percolated the public consciousness. It is not a view held by the academic community, but it is, sadly, still a prominent aspect of how castles are presented to the public. At Warwick the 'dungeons' are one of the main attractions, and visitors are charged considerably extra to enter. In fact the 'dungeon experience' has no physical connection with the actual prison at all - it is in a separate building in the gatehouse and represents an ugly caricature of prison life, reinforcing all the stereotypical clichés that grossly distort the view of the true nature of medieval castle life. The original prison, in the basement of Caesar's Tower, is, in fact, a rare example of a purpose-built 14th century prison in England. The situation is unlikely to change, but perhaps we might advance to a better understanding of how this function influenced the fabric of major castles.

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Castles as Prisons - Appendix

Appendix - Documented list of castles used in England and Wales as prisons 1/2

Castle	County	Date first mentioned (or attributed)	Location of prison	Converted or purpose built	Royal, baronial, or ecclesiastic
Wallingford	Berkshire	1071	Unknown	Converted(?)	R
Tower of London	Middlesex	1100	White Tower	Converted	R
Corfe	Dorset	01/07/1106	Unknown	Unknown	R
Bristol	Somerset	1141	Unknown	Unknown	B
Bedford	Bedfordshire	1166	Unknown	Unknown	R
Lincoln	Lincolnshire	1168	Unknown		R
Gloucester	Gloucestershire	1185		Purpose built	R
Oxford	Oxfordshire	1185	Probably bailey		R
Launceston	Cornwall	1187	Unknown	Purpose built?	B
Stourton	Staffordshire	1184-96		Yes?	R
Windsor	Berkshire	1185			R
Carlisle	Cumberland	1194			R
Lydford	Devon	1195	'Strong house'	Purpose built	R
Lancaster	Lancashire	1196	Unknown	Unknown	R
Chichester	Sussex	1198			R
Newcastle-under-Lyme	Staffordshire	1199	Unknown	Possibly purpose built?	R
Stafford	Staffordshire	1200			B
Guildford	Surrey	1202	Great Tower	Converted	R
Norwich	Norfolk	1220			R
Canterbury	Kent	1220			R
Shrewsbury	Staffordshire	1221			R
Worcester	Worcestershire	1221	Southern half	Purpose built?	R
Taunton	Somerset	1225			E
Salisbury	Shropshire	1226	Possibly in the bailey	Unknown	R
Colchester	Essex	1226	Unknown	Converted	R
Waytemore, Bishops Stortford	Hertfordshire	1234	Unknown	Unknown	B
Criccieth	Caernarfonshire	1239	Mural tower?	Converted	R
Chester	Cheshire	1241	Unknown (later the outer gate-house)	Later purpose built	R
Hereford	Herefordshire	1241	Mural tower	Converted	R
Sherbourne	Dorset	1242	Unknown	Unknown	R
Stamford	Lincolnshire	1262	Separate building	Purpose built	R
Wark on Tyne (possible it wasn't in the castle)	Northumberland	01/04/1263	Unknown	Unknown	B

Castles as Prisons - Appendix

Appendix - Documented list of castles used in England and Wales as prisons 2/2

Castle	County	Date first mentioned (or attributed)	Location of prison	Converted or purpose built	Royal, baronial, or ecclesiastic
Bridgnorth	Shropshire	1281	Barbican (great tower afterwards)		R
St Briavel's	Gloucestershire	1281-92	(Later in the gatehouse)		R
Conwy	Caernarfonshire	Built between 1283 and 1288	Outer ward	Purpose built	R
Cambridge	Cambridgeshire	Built between 1286 and 1296	Mural tower (beneath constables' chamber)?	Purpose built?	R
Pickering	Yorkshire	1323	Gatehouse	Purpose built?	R
Goodrich	Herefordshire	1326-1356	Lower level annex to great tower		B
Pembroke	Pembrokeshire	1331	Possibly mural tower of the inner ward	Converted?	B
Newark	Nottinghamshire	1342-1347	4 oubliettes		E
Sleaford	Lincolnshire	1342-1347			E
Somerton	Lincolnshire	1359-1360			R
Eccleshall	Staffordshire	1364-1367			E
Warwick	Warwickshire	By 1369	Tower	Purpose built	B
Queenborough	Kent	1371			R
Amberley	Sussex	1413-1416			E
Melbourne	Derbyshire	1415			R
Huntingdon	Herefordshire	1521	Mural tower	Converted?	B
Heighley	Staffordshire	1534			B
Thorne Peel Hill	Yorkshire	1534	Unknown	Unknown	B
New Radnor	Radnorshire	1535	Gatehouse	Converted	B
Stockport	Cheshire	1537	Unknown	Unknown	B
Dalton Tower	Lancashire	1545		Purpose built?	B
Great Yarmouth	Norfolk	1550		Converted	Town-owned
Wigmore	Herefordshire	Mid-16th century		Converted?	B
Bolton	Yorkshire	1568			B
Sheffield	Yorkshire	1570			B
Halton	Cheshire	1579			0
Bottreaux	Cornwall	1600	Unknown	Unknown	B
Flint	Flintshire	1785			0
Carmarthen	Carmarthenshire	1789	Gatehouse	Converted	0
Castle Rushen	Isle of Man	1813			0

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Notes

- ¹ King 1983, xvii
- ² Toy 1953, p. 254
- ³ Friar 2003, pp. 235–236
- ⁴ Hislop, 2013, p. 200
- ⁵ Attenborough 1922, pp. 63–73
- ⁶ Attenborough 1922, p.103
- ⁷ Pollock & Maitland 1898a, p. 49
- ⁸ Plucknett 1956, p.13
- ⁹ Cameron 1983, pp. 2-3
- ¹⁰ Keats-Rohan 2009, p.55
- ¹¹ Pugh 1955, pp. 2-5
- ¹² Pollock & Maitland 1898b, p. 516
- ¹³ Warren 1987, p. 134
- ¹⁴ Brown & Curnow 1984, pp. 5–9
- ¹⁵ Brown & Curnow 1984, pp. 9–12
- ¹⁶ Impey & Parnell 2000, p.17
- ¹⁷ Creighton 2002, p.138
- ¹⁸ Hollister, C. Warren, 2001, p. 116
- ¹⁹ Hollister 2001, pp.116–117
- ²⁰ Others in the 12th century include: William, Count of Mortain in 1106 as a prisoner of war. Constance of France in 1150 on orders of Geoffrey de Mandeville. William Fitz Osbert in 1196 for protesting taxation levied for rescue of Richard I. John de Courcy in 1199 for rebellion in Ireland.
- ²¹ Quoted by Hollister, 2001, pp. 133–134
- ²² Mason 2004
- ²³ Impey & Parnell 2000, p. 17
- ²⁴ Parnell 1993, p. 20
- ²⁵ Mathieu 1999, p.124, 134
- ²⁶ Toy 1953, p. 254
- ²⁷ Emery 1996, p. 144
- ²⁸ Goodall 2006, pp. 17–19
- ²⁹ Clark 1866, p. 443
- ³⁰ Malden 1911, pp. 547–560
- ³¹ Pugh 1968, p.347; Woodburn & Guy 2005-6, p. 29
- ³² Davis 2012-13, pp. 282–284
- ³³ Renn 1975, p. 178
- ³⁴ Renn 1975, pp. 176–177; see also Richard T. Spence, *Skipton Castle and its Builders*, Skipton Castle, 2002. The basement appears to have been an open drawbridge pit and was vaulted over later in its life.
- ³⁵ Pounds 1990, p. 100
- ³⁶ RCAHMW 1925, p.283.
- ³⁷ Pugh 1955, pp. 9–12
- ³⁸ Brown, Colvin & Taylor 1963, pp. 612–613
- ³⁹ Brown, Colvin & Taylor 1963, p.559
- ⁴⁰ Malden, 1911, pp. 547–560
- ⁴¹ Brown, Colvin & Taylor 1963, p. 658
- ⁴² Allen 1882–3, p. 318
- ⁴³ Shoesmith, 2014, p. 22
- ⁴⁴ Renn 1993 p. 11
- ⁴⁵ Shoesmith 2014, pp.161–162. Readers should also consult ‘*The Dungeon, Goodrich Castle - Excavation and Building Recording*’, Nov, 2008, HAS series 807 (Archaeological Investigations Ltd). The prison may have extended into the basement of the adjacent keep by a cut-through passage. It is documented that Richard Talbot sought a licence for the gaol in 1348.
- ⁴⁶ Merriam-Webster Inc 1991, pp.152–153
- ⁴⁷ See CSG *Journal* 28, (2014-5) .
- ⁴⁸ Quoted in Brown, Colvin & Taylor 1963, p. 694
- ⁴⁹ Cameron 1983, p. 6; Tabraham 1997, p. 50
- ⁵⁰ Tabraham 1997, p. 50
- ⁵¹ Tabraham 2007, pp.14–17
- ⁵² W Mackay Mackenzie, 1927, pp. 105-109
- ⁵³ Richardson 1933, p.6
- ⁵⁴ Ewart et al 2004, pp.75–76
- ⁵⁵ Lewis 2003, pp.31–33
- ⁵⁶ Tabraham 1997, pp.78–87
- ⁵⁷ Tabraham 1997, p.78
- ⁵⁸ Brears 2011, p.206
- ⁵⁹ Guy 2013-14
- ⁶⁰ See W H Knowles, 1926
- ⁶¹ Stephens 1969, pp. 452–475
- ⁶² Toy 1953, p.254
- ⁶³ Marshall 1998, p.112
- ⁶⁴ Pugh 1968, p. 354
- ⁶⁵ Barrow 1989, p.53
- ⁶⁶ Warren 1973, p. 208
- ⁶⁷ Douglas & Greenaway 1981, pp. 446–449
- ⁶⁸ RCHME 1970, pp.52–100. Corfe has a long history for holding state prisoners. King John, in a letter dated 1203, makes reference to a prison riot. Having ordered the constable of Corfe to send him two of his prisoners, Savaric de Mallion and Amery de Forz, under good escort, John adds that he is to take care that a sufficient garrison remains to guard the castle with the rest of the prisoners, ‘*better than it was guarded when the aforesaid Savaric took and held the keep against us*’.
- ⁶⁹ Prestwich 1980, p.97; Prestwich 2005, pp. 215–216
- ⁷⁰ Brown 2004, pp. 143–144
- ⁷¹ Avent, Suggett & Longley 2011, 10–11; Avent 2004, p. 15
- ⁷² Lambert of Ardres, Ch. 77.
- ⁷³ Quoted by Coulson 2003, pp. 73–74
- ⁷⁴ Pugh 1955, pp. 13–14
- ⁷⁵ Bassett 1943, pp. 244–245
- ⁷⁶ Howes 2010, p. 16
- ⁷⁷ RCHME 1975, pp. 43–46
- ⁷⁸ Summerson 2008, pp. 12–13. Mary was lodged in the ‘Warden’s Tower’, later known as Queen Mary’s Tower, with a small court. She borrowed money from the city’s merchants to support herself, but the main cost of keeping her household, averaging £56 a week, fell on Queen Elizabeth.
- ⁷⁹ Ludlow 2014; Guy 2012–13
- ⁸⁰ Ludlow 2014, pp, 33-34.
- ⁸¹ Pugh 1968, p. 347
- ⁸² Parnell 1993, p. 112