

# CASTLES OF THE COTSWOLDS



The Cotswolds are rich in houses of all kinds and scales and periods, from shepherds' and weavers' cottages to royal mansions. They boast a greater density of fine houses than any comparable region in England, based on the wealth of wool, the presence of fine building stone and the conservatism of a rural area, which remained remote well into the twentieth century and where the pace of change was always slow.

Yet the picture is not uniform, and representation is patchy. There are few feudal castles extant in the Cotswolds. The area was settled and peaceable from early times, though there was a feudal battle at Nibley Green, near Wotton-under-Edge, following a long drawn-out squabble over inheritances between William, Lord Berkeley, and Thomas Talbot, Viscount Lisle, as late as 1470, said to be the last, private, pitched battle in England. Domestic planning round courtyards, within moats and enclosing walls, and defensive features, such as embattled parapets and machicolations, are

*Above: Caption required (Beverston)*

*Left: Berkeley Castle and terraces from the west: the shell keep to the left, dating from 1153, is the oldest part of Britain's oldest inhabited castle. The Berkeley family have lived here for 900 years. The inner gatehouse is to the right.*



## Berkeley Castle, Gloucestershire

as likely to be ornamental archaisms in chivalric taste as functional necessities.

There were the usual timber castles, moats, and fortified manor houses of which little or nothing remains. Above ground, Brimpsfield (a major castle of the Giffards), Newington Bagpath, Miserden and Upper Slaughter are post-Conquest mottes remaining as sometimes impressive mounds of earth, unexcavated, which bury their myriad secrets. The motte at Brimpsfield was succeeded by a stone castle, demolished by 1327. There is also some evidence of earthworks at Castle Godwyn, now known for its eighteenth-century house described on page XX.

Berkeley Castle is the noblest of all, a marcher castle commanding the great Vale of Severn. It stands proud on a stone ridge over the river meadows in an open-grained tufa stone with a pinky-grey tinge, by the percolation of iron,

described tellingly as 'the colour of old brocade' in the old guide book by Vita Sackville-West. It is more than any other in this book a place of superlatives. It claims to be England's oldest continuously inhabited castle, the oldest domestic building still in use in the county of Gloucestershire, and is remarkable for being continuously inhabited by the same Berkeley (FitzHarding) family for 900 years. It dates from 1117; the feudal shell keep of 1153–56 still stands, revetting the earlier (1067) motte of the Norman magnate, William FitzOsbern.

Berkeley Castle lies just outside the hill region proper, but

*The feudal Castle stands a rugged agglomeration in mauve-grey stone viewed over the level meadows from the south; in medieval times, these could be flooded at will for defence.*

*Inner bailey. The hexagonal entrance tower (centre) leads to the great hall (left) and state rooms (right). The French Gothic doorway was inserted as part of thoroughgoing improvements in the 1920s, following the sale of Berkeley Square.*



the baronial territory, or 'harness', of the Berkeleys dominated a huge tract of the south Cotswolds, along the hills from Tetbury to the outskirts of Bristol and Gloucester. Numerous manor houses were built within it for cadet branches, relations, or sometimes henchmen and dependants, of the Berkeley overlords, of which not a few survive today, including Bradley Court, Dodington, Wanswell Court, Stoke Park, Little Sodbury, and Yate Court.

The Berkeleys held several castles in the area, including one at Dursley, which the antiquary John Leland, visiting in 1540, described as, 'fell to decay and is clean taken down', and at Wotton-under-Edge. The latter was in truth a fortified courtier house, dismantled for its building materials in time for a visit by Henry VII to Berkeley Castle in 1491, and already a ruin by the date of Leland's visit.

Thomas, 8th Lord Berkeley, was the great builder of the family, building in the court Decorated style of the fourteenth century. To him we can attribute the building of Thorpe Tower and the extensive domestic range at Berkeley Castle, begun in 1326, adapting the feudal power base as a palatial residence in more settled times. The great hall, where the last jester in England fell to his death from the minstrels' gallery as late as 1728, has a fine timber roof, screens from a Berkeley estate in Glamorganshire and the distinctive 'Berkeley' polygonal arches. It is flanked at the upper end by the state rooms (now two drawing rooms) and chapel (now the morning room), which has the translations from the Book of Revelations (1387) of John Trevisa, a castle chaplain, written faintly on the beams; and at the lower end by the octagonal kitchen and service rooms (shown as a dining room today).



*The Castle from the west with its Victorian overgrowth of ivy and topiary yews – now vanished – on the sheltered lower terrace.*

## Beverston, Gloucestershire

Beverston, near Tetbury, was also a Berkeley seat, and is the only Cotswold castle still standing. Although 'many ages more ancient than Berkeley', the best of what remains is relatively late, a fragment dating from the time of Thomas, 8th Lord Berkeley.

Beverston's history is as old as England itself. Earl Godwin held it as his headquarters with his sons in 1051, and set forth from here to do battle with Edward the Confessor. King Stephen and the Empress Matilda joined in combat here before 1140. It was rebuilt and 'turreted' by Maurice de Gaunt, 'without the king's licence', shortly before he was given a permission to crenellate in 1229. Two round towers still stand from his small quadrangular bastion, with part of a picturesque twin-towered gatehouse.

In 1330, Thomas Berkeley purchased the manor, and over the following six years, according to John Smyth, 'much repaired and beautified [the castle], with the park adjoining ...

where he spent many months in the year'. He it was who was lord of Berkeley Castle at the time of the grisly murder of Edward II just three years before (in 1327). He upgraded the comforts of the early defensive building as a fortified manor house for residential use, adding his Berkeley Tower – impressive work, built (according to Smyth) at the time of the Black Death, in 1348–49. The west range of Thomas's castle still stands more or less intact, containing a solar above a vaulted undercroft, and flanked at the angles with square towers.

An ingenious stair contrived within the walls ascends to Thomas's private rooms. A first-floor chapel, with access to the solar and hall, is of the courtly standard we associate with him

*The castle block stands forlornly across the moat to the left, dating to a rebuild by Thomas Lord Berkeley in the 1360s. The present domestic wing to the right was probably added after a fire in 1691 on the site of the medieval hall.*

*The unrestored east gatehouse with a guardroom entrance and grooves for the portcullis.*





at Berkeley, with the best Gothic detailing of any house in the Cotswolds: vaulted ceilings, rich double sedilia with crocketed heads, and a *piscina*. Above the chapel there is another private oratory giving off Lord Berkeley's chamber, which had a circular window taking up virtually the whole west wall. The two-storey gatehouse to the east was probably added by him, of which one tower is extant. It has the usual guardrooms with lodging over, grooves for an immense portcullis in the archway, and a drawbridge over the moat.

Thomas Berkeley ran huge flocks of sheep here, consolidating sheep walks and shearing as many as 5,775 sheep in 1333 in his manors round Beverston, where one year he stocked the demesne land with 1500 wethers. This was the summit of Beverston's short-lived prosperity, when it was a township with its own fair and market.

The descendants of one of Thomas's younger sons, calling themselves the Berkeleys of Beverstone, sold in 1597 to Sir John Poyntz. By 1612 Beverston was in the hands of Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, of the same family as Sir Baptist Hicks, the great benefactor of Chipping Campden and ancestor of the Earls St Aldwyn, who lived until 2008 at Williamstrip (a house designed largely by Sir John Soane and David Brandon, set the other side of Cirencester). In the Civil War, the castle was

besieged, defeated by stealth following the capture of the royalist commander, Colonel Oglethorpe, and slighted by Colonel Massey, whose headquarters were at Chavenage, next door. The castle has never recovered. Following a fire in 1691, the present house, a long block with mullioned and transomed windows, was built on the site of the medieval south range, retaining the west wall. Inside there is a fine staircase with oak balusters.

The Hicks-Beaches sold in 1842, when the estate was added to the Holford family's extensive landholdings centred on Westonbirt. The castle had already declined to a farmhouse and a model village was built to the order of the Holfords, with cottages lining the road probably designed by Lewis Vulliamy in simplified Tudor, with distinctive bargeboards and Gothic porches.

The castle lives on as a ruinous hulk of towers and ivy-mantled walls, pitted by time, impenetrable beyond the road and a dry moat, with a medieval barn and church forming the backdrop to a romantic garden. It was created by Mrs Arthur Strutt after she bought the estate as war broke out in 1939.

*Large hearth in the 1691 wing, rebuilt for the Hicks-Beach family on the scale of a comfortable manor house.*

*The late-seventeenth-century staircase to the south range, with widely-set oak balusters.*





## Sudeley Castle, Gloucestershire

Sudeley Castle is set splendidly in a wide and wooded combe under the Cotswold escarpment. It is not a castle in the sense of a feudal fastness, fortified and defensive, or an instrument of conquest. As it stands it is a late-Tudor courtier's house, which has swollen into a royal palace, rambling round two courtyards like an Oxbridge college. It has two queens to boast of, and acquired plenty of royal connections. As it achieved the glory of royal ownership and occupation, Elizabethan and Stuart remodelling and aggrandisement inevitably followed.

Sudeley preserves its gaunt skyline of defensive towers and battlements, which can never have been very effective for military purposes, and failed when they were put to the test in the Civil War. Then it was slighted and all but abandoned for two centuries, when it declined to a romantic ruin. Its nineteenth-century thoroughgoing restoration by the Dent brothers, magnate glovers from Worcestershire, translated it into a comfortable Victorian country house, and a shrine and museum.

Its recorded history is as long as that of any house in the

Cotswolds. It first occurs as a manor of Ethelred the Unready, who gave it to his daughter Goda, sister of Edward the Confessor. The Sudeleys of Sudeley (and then the Tracys of Toddington) were heirs, claiming direct descent from Charlemagne, and were settled here before the Conquest.

The castle and manor came into the possession of the Boteler family of Wem, Shropshire, by marriage after the Black Death, when the history of the present castle begins. It was mainly built by Ralph Boteler after 1442, when he was appointed Lord High Admiral of England, and it preserves his plan of two courtyards, set at a canted angle – the whole *enceinte* was probably originally moated. Only the gatehouse and two evocative towers at the angles of the inner court remain.

During the Wars of the Roses the Botelers backed the wrong side, and Sudeley was forfeited to the Crown, whose property it remained from 1469 to 1547. The Tudor kings granted it as a prize to a succession of loyal courtiers and favourites. Edward IV first granted it to his brother, Richard



*Sudeley Castle and double yew hedge (planted in 1856) from the south, showing the ivy-mantled long east range, and chapel (right) restored by Sir George Gilbert Scott.*

*West end of the chapel of c.1460 with its corbelled bell turret. Queen Katherine Parr was buried here in 1548.*

'Crouchback', Duke of Gloucester. He upgraded the accommodation to a royal standard in the 1470s, with new apartments of state (largely in ruins today).

There followed the Dukes of Buckingham and Bedford. Henry VIII visited on a progress with Anne Boleyn in 1535, a year before she was tried and beheaded. Late in his reign, it became the seat of his Queen, Katherine Parr, the last of his six wives, who alone survived him, and who had secured the house from her brother, William Parr, Marquis of Northampton. Henry VIII died in 1547, and his successor, the boy-king Edward VI, gave Sudeley to his favourite uncle by marriage, Sir Thomas Seymour, who was created Baron Sudeley (and Lord High Admiral of England).

Sudeley had a fraught afterlife as the dashing Prince Rupert's base during the Civil War, strategically placed between the Royalist headquarters in Oxford and supporters in the West. It was besieged and sacked by Colonel Edward Massey, who laid waste to so many other Cotswold houses. He removed the roofs and his men plundered the chapel and desecrated the graves, including that of Queen Katherine Parr.

Two centuries of decline followed. Katherine's grave was rediscovered in 1782, when the increasingly picturesque ruin became a shrine. A fine series of John Buckler watercolours



document its state of abandonment in 1818. They had been commissioned by the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, who had bought Sudeley Castle, together with 60 acres from Lord Rivers of Stratfield Saye, in 1810, with the intention of restoring it. Sir John Soane drew up plans, but they were never carried out, as they were too expensive. The habitable part of the castle declined to a wayfarers' inn, known as the Castle Arms, as the building reached the nadir of its long history.

Its modern history begins after two bachelor brothers, William and John Dent, acquired first the estate from Lord Rivers in 1830 and then the castle from the Duke of Buckingham in 1837. Men of antiquarian sympathies, they commissioned Harvey Eginton of Worcester to rebuild the castle (1837–40) in the spirit of the Romantic Revival, distinctly, flamboyantly *faux*. He made the outer court ready for the brothers' habitation, and improved the picturesque ruins of the inner court, reinstating features such as 'correct' fan vaulting and hood moulds. The Dents began to acquire Tudor objects to furnish the house, notably at the Strawberry

Hill sale in 1842, the nucleus of its superb collections.

William Dent died in 1854 and on John's death in 1855, the estate passed to their nephew, John Coucher Dent, who had married Emma Brocklehurst, an heiress, in 1847. They continued to oversee a thoroughgoing redecoration and restoration (1854–57) of the castle and chapel under Sir George Gilbert Scott – or, more accurately, his pupil, John Drayton Wyatt. His hand lies heavily on Sudeley. The inside of the chapel was rebuilt (virtually), except for the sedilia, despite Ruskin's (and by then Emma Dent's) protestations. It is redeemed by good detailing and quality in glass and pews and fittings, and contains the tomb of Queen Katherine Parr, in which her remains were reinterred in 1861. Drayton Wyatt is also responsible for the gatehouse and the Neo-Gothic north tower building in the outer court, dated 1886–90.

Emma Dent reigned for nearly half a century as Sudeley's

*The long panelled library with its Elizabethan fireplace of Edmund Chandos was remodelled by Walter Godfrey in 1930.*

*A corner of Queen Katherine Parr's room with the Neo-Tudor ceiling, Swiss and German glass inserted in the oriel window, and a collection of portrait miniatures.*



energetic and imaginative Victorian châtelaine. A cultivated collector, and much-loved philanthropist of the town of Winchcombe, she filled the house with good things, buying pictures, literary manuscripts, collecting relics and memorabilia of Katherine Parr and Charles I. Early photographs in *Country Life* show how studiously she developed the antiquarian mood her uncles-in-law had created, with rampant ivy softening the façades, replanting the gardens with formal parterres and yews, and expansive lawns. Emma died childless in 1900, when her nephew inherited, hyphenating his name as Henry Dent-Brocklehurst.

The plan of two courtyards is preserved from the time of Boteler, though they are joined awkwardly now where the cross-range has been destroyed. The outer court, apart from the old north gateway, is late Elizabethan; the lodgings are of about 1577, with some fine Renaissance-Classical detail to the fenestration in the textbook style of Kirby House, Northamptonshire. It leads to the older inner court, retaining the original range of the 1440s to the west. The south range where the hall would have stood is sadly missing; the west range probably comprised the royal apartments of Richard 'Crouchback', still standing a full two-storey height, but defiantly in ruins, with fireplaces stranded at first-floor level, as if left by an outgoing tide.

In the habitable part of the castle, the interiors, 'scraped' and panelled or relined, have lost their ancient patina, and some highlights from the collections have been dispersed (including paintings by Constable and Poussin). Improvements were made in the 1930s by Walter Godfrey, who raised floor levels, inserted panelling, new bay windows, and radically moved Tudor fireplaces around. In the 1980s, the John Fowler firm adapted the old kitchens and servants' hall in the private apartments.

Mark Dent-Brocklehurst inherited in 1949, and began to open the house and garden to the public as one of the Cotswolds' most popular attractions. His widow, Elizabeth, now Lady Ashcombe, continues the inspired traditions of Emma Dent as the driving force behind the development of the glorious gardens and new exhibitions, as the castle provides a home for three families.

*The east range with the library bays added by Walter Godfrey and the terminal north-east tower completed by John Drayton Wyatt in 1890.*

