

## **Kenilworth Castle Project**



***By Alastair Forinton***

***Tell me, ye ivy'd towers, ca ye repeat,  
The tales of revelry your lords have told?  
Sir Walter Scott, "Kenilworth" 1821.***

### **Historical background of Kenilworth Castle**

There has been a castle at the site at Kenilworth for nearly 1,000 years. The town is strategically positioned in the heart of England, a key geographical position to reach all corners of the kingdom for defensive and attacking purposes. The castle has been a royal stronghold for much of its history and has been owned and celebrated by famous historical figures from John of Gaunt to Robert Dudley to Sir Walter Scott. Elizabeth I is said to have visited the castle up to 3 times.

### **Development of the Kenilworth Castle over time.**

Throughout its history, Kenilworth Castle has had 3 major functions. It has been: A fortress, a palace, and a romantic ruin. It can be argued that the fortress is Kenilworth's most significant function. This is because the castle retains so many of the features of defence to this day and over the course of its history it remained a fortress for the longest.

A castle was first built on the site by Geoffrey de Clinton, Royal Chamberlain in the early part of the 12th century in order to keep watch over the powerful Roger, Earl of Warwick who was a threat to the King's power in the Midlands known then as Mercia. It can be argued that evidence of an early Norman Motte remains under the ruins of the Great Hall. This supports the idea that the site at Kenilworth was important even before the building of De Clinton's Keep.

The Keep itself is an impenetrable building with thick high walls, evidence of arrow loop windows as well as a water well that provided fresh water in times of attack or prolonged siege.



Source 1 - The Keep at Kenilworth Castle, the first stone structure built on the site. The original square towers are seen, with evidence of arrow loop windows. The larger windows were said to have been added later by Robert Dudley when the castle was transformed into a palace.

The Castle began to transform in the late 1370s by John of Gaunt, the son of Edward III. Gaunt remodelled the castle adding larger kitchens, the Strong Tower, Saintlowe Tower as well as the great hall. The castle was renowned as one of the most beautiful in England and the great hall's architecture was considered a masterpiece of the age. Unfortunately it was ruined during the Civil War in 1642-1651, when the castle was destroyed by the Parliamentarians. Many of the beautiful stone carvings remain. Many historians believe that St George's Hall at Windsor would have been very similar to the beamed roof at Kenilworth.



Source 2 -Image of the remains of Gaunt's great hall. The large gothic style windows are still visible.



Source 3 - St George's Hall at Windsor Castle. Many historians argue that the great hall at Kenilworth would have looked very similar.



Source 4 - A reconstruction of Kenilworth Castle surrounded by the “Mere” or “Great Lake”. At the top of the picture the Pleasance is shown. Only groundworks remain today. The Mere was a significant feature providing protection and also pleasure. It is a feature of both a fortress and a palace.

In 1553 Kenilworth Castle was first granted to Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester. Dudley, a favourite of Elizabeth I altered the castle significantly. Leicester’s gatehouse was created this was a more palatial entrance to the castle rather than Mortimer’s tower, the entrance of a fortress.

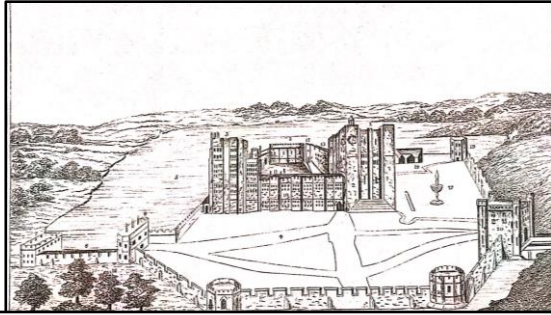


Source 5 - Leicester's gatehouse.

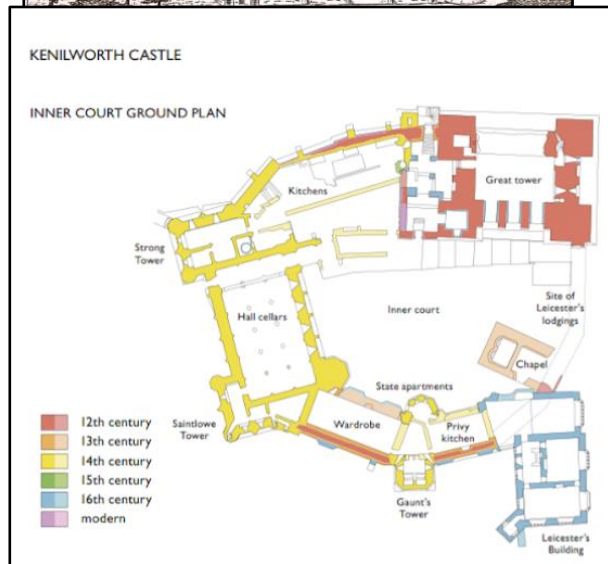


Source 6. Robert Dudley's coat of arms.

Leicester's building was also built by Dudley in order to accommodate the many guests who visited the castle. Elizabeth I was said to have visited the castle 3 times during her reign. At the top of the building was said to have been a dancing hall where the Queen, who loved to dance, danced when she visited the castle.



Source 7 - An engraving from 1575 which shows how Leicester had changed the medieval castle into a luxurious palace. Elizabeth I did not build any new palaces during her time as Queen. She would travel around the country visiting her subjects, this encouraged them to build big palaces for her.



Source 8 - A diagram showing how the castle has changed over time.

### **Features of a fortress**

At Kenilworth Castle many of the features of a defensive fortress are still visible today. The castle is built on a rise, this is visible from the car park formerly known as "The Brays" This meant that the castle's height allowed a clear field of vision and approaching enemies could quickly be seen.



Source 9 - Image showing the outer curtain wall as well as the slight rise of the castle.

Mortimer's gatehouse is the original entrance to the castle. It has a narrow walkway, and the walls are thick with many examples of arrow loop windows used for defence. The arrow loops were used for archers to attack enemies outside of the walls. They are impossible to breach

from the outside. A large metal portcullis would have hung at the entrance, only the groove marks remain.



Source 8 - Mortimer's gatehouse.

Because the castle has been added to over time, you can see many examples of different types of towers. Square towers were an early Norman construction. They have high, thick walls and did provide significant protection from enemies. The square towers at Kenilworth are best seen in the Keep.



Source 9 - The Keep with evidence of square towers.

Square towers were later replaced by the more sturdy round towers, unlike square towers they were difficult to undermine. This meant that the castle was less likely to be breached.



Source 10 - Lunn's Tower, an example of a round tower found on the outer curtain wall .

In 1266 there was a great siege at Kenilworth that lasted for 6 months. The castle was taken by Simon De Montfort who had promised to return it to Henry III. He failed to do so, the castle was clearly an impressive fortress and had a superior range of weaponry. This meant that the king had to order Trebuchet machines. Archaeologists in the 1960 found evidence of stone balls weighing up to 300lbs. The stone missiles did destroy a building within the inner walls, but the size of the Mere kept the royal forces at bay. The siege ended in December of that year due to disease and starvation not because the castle had fallen or showed weakness.



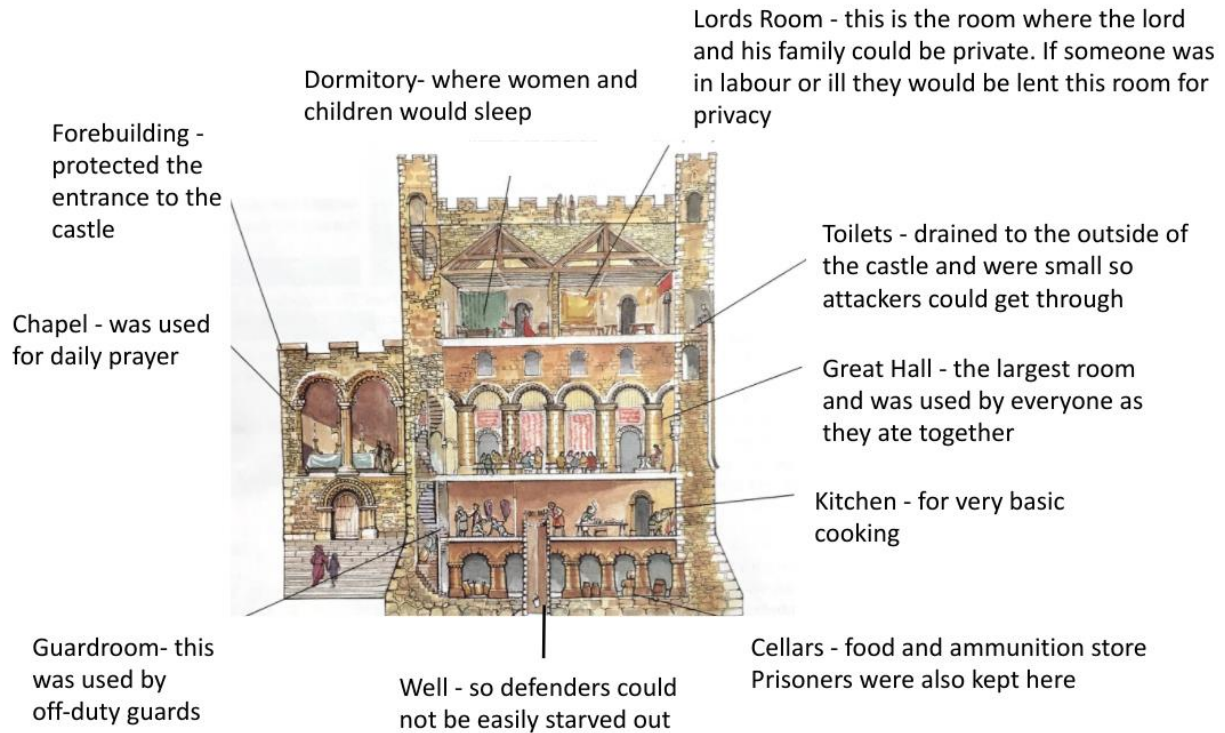
Source 11 - A contemporary medieval source showing the great siege in 1266. The Trebuchet can clearly be seen.

As stated earlier, the Mere or Great Lake was a feature of both a fortress and a palace. It was however, first built for defensive features by King John between 1210 and 1215. This made the castle unobtainable by enemies.



Source 12 - A model of Kenilworth displayed in the stable coffee shop at the site, shows how the Mere surrounded the walls making it difficult for attackers to get near to the walls.

### **Medieval life within the castle**



Source 13 - This diagram shows us different aspects of life inside medieval castles such as Kenilworth. There was space for entertainment, prayer and day-to-day living. However, the main focus was defense.

During the medieval era Kenilworth took on a largely defensive role. It was during Robert Dudley's time at the castle that life there became more extravagant and about leisure. Dudley made sure that the castle was fit for a Queen. Inside Leicester's building, bedchambers had large fireplaces and large windows to fill the rooms with light. The largest room was the gallery which had wonderful views across the lake. The size of the room made it useful for entertainment and it was here that there would be dances when the Queen visited.

Cutaway reconstruction  
of Leicester's Building at  
the time of Elizabeth I's  
visit in 1575

- Withdrawing chamber
- Elizabeth I's bedroom
- Inner chamber
- Gallery
- Bedroom



Source 14 - a diagram of Leicester's building showing the large bedrooms and the gallery for entertainment.

## **Bibliography**

***"Kenilworth" by Sir Walter Scott***

**English Heritage website- [www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/kenilworth-castle/](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/kenilworth-castle/)**

***Kenilworth Castle Guidebook***

***The Reign of Elizabeth - Schools History Project Textbook***