

CORFE CASTLE

The Square, Wareham, Dorset BH20 5EE

25th July 2022

I could remember being in Corfe village in 1987 and looking up at the castle, but I have no recollection of actually going inside. Apparently we did. During a Dorset holiday, I was therefore intrigued to arrive once more at Corfe and see the castle up close. In fact, it felt very close indeed, as we left the car park and took a narrow path that wound straight up the side of the motte, to the level of the gatehouse.



Climbing up the motte (photo by Alan Santillo)

Corfe village (also called Corfe Castle) was at this level, so our first stop was the National Trust tea room, which was only just opening. Here we sat outside with a tantalising view of the castle in front of us. It's a good feeling, sitting with a decent cappuccino, a shared slice of cake and some heady castle anticipation.

Now and again there were signs of some blue sky attempting to break through the significant cloud cover, but unfortunately with hardly any success. I'd been hoping for some blue sky mainly for photographic purposes, but the weather gods were not on my side and the sky remained decidedly grey and overcast, despite a promising forecast. However, it was dry and it was a castle I'd wanted to visit for some time, so we jolly well went and made the best of it!

By the time we left the tearoom, showed our National Trust cards and entered through the castle gatehouse, there were already quite a few people there. Like most fortifications, Corfe Castle's strategic location in the Purbeck Hills meant that it was an important defensive site long before the castle that we know of today started to be built on the orders of William the Conqueror in the 11th century.

The castle sits in a gap between two roughly equal parts of the Purbeck Hills, so it therefore makes complete sense that the name 'Corfe' is Anglo-Saxon for 'gap' and in Saxon times, it was known as Corfe Gate, or if you like, Gap Gate.

In 876 AD, the Danes descended on the area and destroyed the nearby town of Wareham, although in the following year they were beaten back to the sea by King Alfred's warriors. Their escape in more than a hundred boats was prevented by the warriors and the weather, resulting in their demise in the sea off Swanage.

In the tenth century, the Saxon stronghold at Corfe Gate, or 'Corfegeat' was enlarged by King Edgar, who used it as his residence. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, when Edgar died suddenly in 975 at the age of 33, there was bitter rivalry for the kingship between supporters of his two sons, Edward and his younger half-brother, Æthelred. As the elder son, Edward inherited the throne as expected, despite his claim being disputed by rebellious nobles and also by his stepmother Ælfthryth, his father's second wife and mother of Æthelred.

Ælfthryth is thought to have moved to the stronghold of Corfegeat and although young King Edward appeared to bear her no grudge, she sought revenge in order for her son Æthelred to become king. When Edward visited the stronghold in 978, he was ambushed and stabbed to death by her servants, no doubt on her orders.

His body was buried in Wareham, but disinterred within a year and removed to Shaftesbury Abbey. Since his remains after that amount of time were said to be miraculously preserved, he was considered a saint and known as Edward the Martyr – the parish church in Corfe Castle village is in fact named after him.

As for his younger stepbrother, the story is that he became known as Æthelred the Unready when his procrastination led to the Danes plundering much of England's south coast, including Dorset. However, his nickname derives from the Old English 'unræd' meaning 'poorly advised' and is a pun on Æthelred, which means 'well-advised'. Whether unready or poorly advised, his reign ended in 1007 and his dynasty eventually came to an end with the Norman invasion of 1066.



View of the keep area from the outer bailey (photo by Alan Santillo)

Corfe's strategic importance was demonstrated when the natural motte of the castle mound was one of the first castles of William the Conqueror to be topped with stone walls. Purbeck limestone was quarried only a few miles away, prized for being easy to shape, but strong enough to resist the effects of weathering.

However, the new king spent little time in England and even that was mainly for hunting deer. Purbeck was considered a good area for hunting and William could well have used the old stone hall in the west bailey, which had been built on the site of an even earlier Saxon building, as a convenient hunting lodge.

This long, rectangular hall had been identified in the 1950s, when excavations showed traces of foundations and post-holes. Local masons had presumably been employed in its construction, as the herringbone style is typically Saxon, along with the rounded windows. Its remains are the earliest surviving part of the castle.



Herringbone design

The old hall would have contained a cellar, or undercroft, divided into store rooms. Above it would have been the great chamber, with living rooms and sleeping quarters for soldiers and workers. It was also used for conducting business.

The enormous stone keep, which was the heart of the castle, was built later. It is not known for certain whether a wooden keep predating the huge stone one was initially erected, but the land and any buildings at the hill's summit were protected by a curtain wall, which was another indication of Corfe's strategic importance.

Archaeologists have suggested the keep might have been built during King William I's reign (1066-1087), although the general consensus is that it was completed in 1105, when his son, King Henry I (reign 1100-35), was on the throne.

The stone keep was clearly intended to be impressively unmissable and it certainly must have succeeded in this aim, standing proudly at a magnificent 80 feet/23 metres above the hilltop. At that time, it would have been a dominant symbol of Norman power that stood out for miles in the surrounding Dorset landscape, particularly after it was whitewashed in 1244.

When William died in 1087, his three sons (Robert, William and Henry) vied for the English Crown. William's will had in fact named his eldest son Robert as Duke of Normandy, while William succeeded his father as king. He reigned until 1100, when he was killed by an arrow whilst hunting in the New Forest. Henry then became king, but like William before him, he was forced to resist Robert's attempts to seize the throne. Well-educated Henry reconciled the Saxons to his Norman rule with a stable government that brought in sound financial and judicial systems.

Another function of the keep was as a safe place for treasures and possessions, as well as locking up prisoners. Henry kept his troublesome brother Robert of Normandy there, before dispatching him to serve a life sentence at Cardiff Castle.

King Henry I died in 1135, but his son and heir William had drowned in 1120, so that Henry had named his daughter Matilda as successor. The idea of a female sovereign did not go down well with many barons and the son of one of Henry's sisters, the ambitious Stephen. He claimed the throne and the time of The Anarchy followed, as Matilda and Stephen fought fiercely for the Crown.

One of Matilda's supporters, Baldwin de Redvers, Earl of Devon, had managed to gain entry to Corfe Castle, along with his garrison of soldiers. Stephen was in Exeter at the time and rushed to Corfe to take the castle. Although he failed against the gallant efforts of Matilda's supporters, the ultimate (though limited) victory was his when Matilda and Stephen agreed that Stephen would keep the Crown until his death, at which time Matilda's son Henry would succeed.

The defenders of Corfe Castle thus submitted to Stephen, but upon his death in 1154, they welcomed Matilda's son Henry II as their king (reign 1154-89). The next reigning monarch was Henry's son Richard I (1189-99), followed by his brother John (reign 1199-1216). The deeply disliked King John had a significant impact on Corfe Castle, perhaps particularly seen in his decidedly luxurious addition to the castle, referred to as the 'gloriette'. This was more or less a pocket palace in the latest architectural style, employing England's finest craftsmen. It was magnificently decorated and had the comfort of an indoor toilet.



The gloriette (photo by Alan Santillo)

After his glorieux had been built, Corfe was John's favourite castle that he visited often, for reasons that may have included its security, its impregnability and its position amid prime hunting ground. It served as a prison and he also kept his valuables there, such as jewellery, treasury money and the coronation crown.

It was therefore no surprise that he strengthened the castle defences. A thick stone curtain wall was built around the west bailey, reinforced with round towers containing arrow slits that allowed archers to defend the steep hillside beneath. A big ditch between the castle mound and the outer bailey was dug by miners and quarrymen and the ditch outside the outer castle gate was enlarged. Records show that a trebuchet, a battering ram and devices for hurling very large stones towards the enemy were included in his armoury. He definitely meant business.

He also had a reputation of cruelty, betrayal and murder. When John had seized the throne after Richard's death, there had been a rival claim from his brother Geoffrey's son, Prince Arthur of Brittany. John besieged Arthur in Poitou, France and not long afterwards, Arthur was murdered, probably by John himself.

He also took Arthur's sister Eleanor and imprisoned her at Corfe Castle, along with her 24 knights. Eleanor is believed to have lived comfortably in the glorieux with other royal ladies and is known to have received gifts of saddles and reins – which is a sure sign she was allowed some freedom, even whilst being a prisoner.

Her knights had a different fate and were thrown into the oubliette, a windowless dungeon of the three-storeyed octagonal Butavant tower that had also been built on John's orders. Unsurprisingly, 22 of them died, although what happened to the remaining two is unclear. The name 'Butavant' is a Norman-French word meaning 'prow', indicating where the tower stands at the end of the projecting west bailey.



The Butavant Tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

During a severe storm in 1860, the top half of the tower collapsed and fell into the River Wicken below, dramatically adding to its history of violence. Ironically, it was while we were at this tower of misery and woe, wondering why it was so named, that the sun came out briefly, before rapidly disappearing again.

Although in 1215 John had agreed to the Magna Carta document safeguarding the rights of free men, he soon infuriated a rebel group of barons by repudiating the document. In 1216, he spent more time at Corfe Castle and died that year. Few mourned his death, but in his favour he had greatly improved the castle.

John's successor was his son Henry (reign 1216-72), who was only nine when his father died. Corfe Castle then became the responsibility of William Marshal, Earl of Pembroke, who was Lord Protector of the kingdom during Henry's early years. William died only three years later, but not before he had released King John's prisoners, including those who had been held at Corfe Castle.

In 1228, the castle was seized by Peter de Mauley (previously an administrator of King John) for Simon de Montfort, who held it as security for the future 'good conduct' of King Henry III. It was Simon who led the rebellion of certain barons against King Henry III's rule, which culminated in the Second Barons' War.

However, the last of the rebels eventually surrendered in 1267 and during Henry III's reign, Corfe Castle was improved and strengthened. The last of the wooden palisades were replaced by stone walls and the internal structure of the keep was repaired. It was during Henry III's reign that the huge outer walls of the keep were rendered and whitewashed, becoming visible for miles around.

The entrance to the west bailey became the very solid double-towered south-west gatehouse, with an inner and outer portcullis and wooden fighting platforms that would have protected guards from enemy arrows and also allowed them to hurl missiles on any enemies below. Three new towers were also built into the walls of the outer bailey, named First, Horseshoe and Plukenet. The latter was named after Alan de Plukenet, who was the castle's constable from 1264-70.



The outer gatehouse (photo by Alan Santillo)

After Henry's death, his son King Edward I (reign 1272-1307) continued the work of his ancestors. He was known as a warrior king and also initiated some extensive castle building, including the magnificent castles at Caernarfon, Conwy, Beaumaris and Harlech in Wales. At Corfe Castle, he finalised the outer bailey defences and the outer gatehouse, as well as completing work on four towers – Butavant, Cockayne, Sauveray and Plenty. By the end of the 13th century, Corfe Castle had reached its peak quite literally, as Edward had increased the height of the keep.

Throughout the many years of building work at the castle during the 13th and 14th centuries, the settlement of Corfe Castle that had already existed around the foot of the mound must have expanded significantly enough for it to be granted a market and a fair in the first half of the 13th century. Many inhabitants worked in the nearby stone quarries and the outer bailey would have been buzzing with the sound of masons, builders, carpenters, plumbers and labourers.



The North Tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

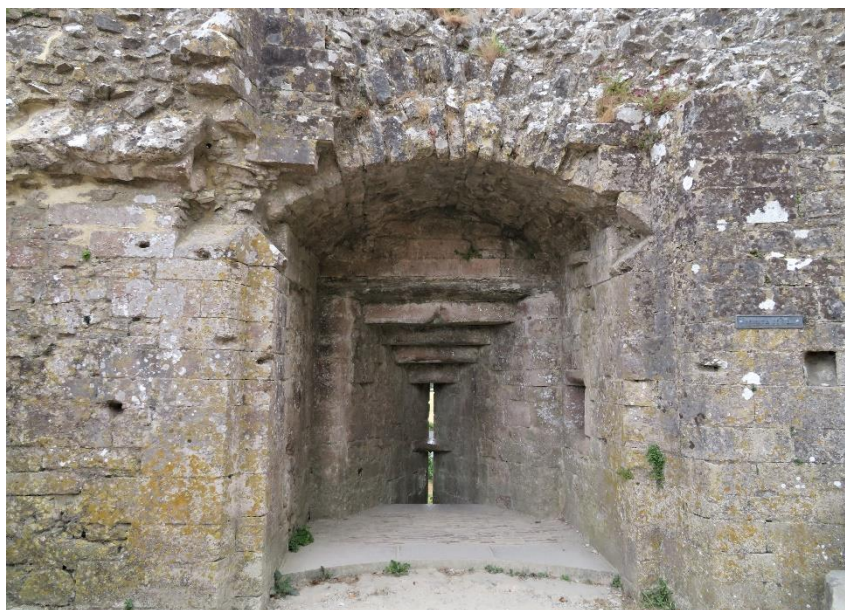
Information after this period seems thin on the ground, but it was King Richard II (reign 1377-99) who granted the castle and manor of Corfe to Thomas Holland, Earl of Kent. After he and his wife died and Corfe was again Crown property, King Henry IV (reign 1399-1413) transferred it to John Beaufort, Earl of Somerset.

He and his heirs held it throughout the Lancastrian versus York Wars of the Roses (1455-87) and in December 1460, Henry Beaufort, 3rd Duke of Somerset, left from Corfe Castle to march with his Lancastrian army to the Battle of Wakefield, where the Lancastrians claimed a resounding victory. However, the tide turned with a decisive triumph for the Yorkists at the Battle of Tewkesbury in May 1471 and Henry was executed in the market square, along with other prisoners.

His estates, including the castle and manor of Corfe, were granted by Yorkist King Edward IV (reign 1461-70) to his brother George, Duke of Clarence. Troublesome George was charged by Parliament with high treason and in 1478, was allegedly drowned in a butt of malmsey wine – a sticky end chosen by himself. Corfe manor and castle again reverted to the Crown, the castle remaining prepared for military action until the death of King Richard III (reign 1483-85) at the Battle of Bosworth.

Before Richard had become king, he had been constable of the castle, which meant he was responsible for its upkeep and basically oversaw everything. These duties included administering the garrison and armoury, ordering repairs, provisioning the kitchen, hiring and firing staff and supervising prisoners held there.

His successor, King Henry VII (reign 1485-1509) granted the castle and manor to his mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort, who had been greatly responsible for his accession to the throne. The Beaufort family had, in fact, provided constables for the castle throughout much of the 15th century and although there is no evidence that Margaret lived at the castle, at least £2,000 was spent on improvements and repairs. Upon her death in 1509, the castle again reverted to the Crown.



The Fourth Tower

In 1536, King Henry VIII (reign 1509-47) granted the manor and castle of Corfe, as well as the Isle of Purbeck, to his illegitimate son, Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond and Somerset. However, Henry Fitzroy died the next year and the estate reverted to the Crown. Upon Henry VIII's death, it was taken over by Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset and Earl of Hertford, who was the protector and guardian of the young King Edward VI (reign 1547-53). When Edward Seymour died in 1553, Corfe for the umpteenth time reverted to the Crown.

It stayed this way until 1572 when Queen Elizabeth I was monarch (reign 1558-1603) and she sold it to a royal favourite, Sir Christopher Hatton. He paid £4,761 18s 7½d, a very precise amount of pre-decimalisation money, for the castle and its estate. Fifteen years later, he became her Lord Chancellor and made many improvements, with fine furnishings, tapestries and glass in windows. When the Spanish Armada was a danger, the castle's defences were strengthened.

Sir Christopher died in 1591 and as he was single, all his possessions passed to his nephew, Sir William Newport, who took the name Hatton by royal licence. When Sir William died in 1597, his second wife Elizabeth inherited his estate, including Corfe Castle. Lady Elizabeth Hatton is believed to have terraced and created gardens in the outer bailey, but in 1634, she sold Corfe Castle and all her Purbeck possessions to Sir John Bankes, the Attorney General.

Her Purbeck possessions included stone quarries, a mill, a vineyard and several thousand acres, with income from rents and farms. Another benefit came in the form of rights to cargo from wrecks, profits from court fines and fishing rights on the River Frome. Sir John must have been pleased, it was a fine purchase indeed.

King Charles I (reign 1625-49) was then on the throne and even while the conflict between the king and his parliament was escalating, the Bankes family was comfortable and at ease in their finely furnished new home. When civil war finally erupted in 1642, Sir John Bankes was summoned to the king in Oxford.

His wife Mary, Lady Bankes, proceeded to send her oldest boys abroad for safety, but shut herself, her younger children and a few servants inside the castle walls, while Sir John was relying on his men who stayed behind to 'hold the fort'.

The following year, most of Dorset was under control of the Parliamentarians, who declared Sir John a traitor. Lady Mary became aware of rumours that while all Purbeck men would be taking part in a traditional May Day stag hunt, Parliamentary troops were planning to storm the castle. She stocked up with food and military supplies, ordered her supporters inside and had the gates bolted.

When the Parliamentarians inevitably stormed the castle walls, they were repelled by the garrison – and also by Lady Mary, her daughters and servants, who hurled heavy stones and burning coals from the ramparts onto the heads of the attackers below. After a siege of what must have felt a long six weeks, the Parliamentarians left, stripping lead from the church and damaging village properties.

Sir John returned to the castle in September 1643 and was clearly very pleased with his wife, who gave birth to a son, William, born at the castle in June 1644. Sir John had returned to the king in January 1644, but by midsummer, Weymouth and Wareham had fallen and Corfe Castle remained the sole Royalist stronghold between London and Exeter. Sir John died suddenly in Oxford in December 1644, but the Bankes family survived, resisting more attempts to take the castle.

Late in 1645, orders were given to step up the attack and reinforcements arrived for another siege. In February 1646, one of Lady Mary's officers betrayed her by leading a group of Parliamentarians, who were pretending to be Royalists, into the castle. She was forced to surrender, but was allowed to leave with her garrison.

The Parliamentary commander saw fit to present Lady Mary with the castle's keys and seals as a mark of respect for her prolonged courage and resilience, which is a testament to her unusual fortitude. However, the castle contents were plundered, including rich tapestries and furniture from the time of Sir Christopher Hatton and possessions belonging to Lady Mary and her family. Lady Mary travelled to London and took lodgings, from where the feisty lady proceeded to petition Parliament to lift the confiscation of her estate.

Meanwhile, in March 1646, an Act of Parliament was passed to slight the castle – that is, to demolish it enough that it was rendered useless for military purposes. As it happened, the castle was so well constructed that its demolition was less than complete. Army sappers dug many deep holes and packed them with gunpowder in order to bring down the towers and ramparts, which created the massive gaps and the bizarre angles of some of the remaining stonework.



Bizarre angles of destruction

After Lady Mary had paid some hefty fines the following year, her property and rights were returned to her, which naturally included the ruined castle. She lived through the interregnum years of 1649-60, when she and her son Ralph searched for the furniture and furnishings that had been taken from the family home. She lived to see King Charles II restored to the throne, but died in April 1661.

Ralph Bankes built a new house at nearby Kingston Lacy on another of the family's estates, while the castle gradually became a destination for intrigued day trippers who were drawn to its romantic Gothic-style charm. After its demolition, much of its stone, lead and timber had been pillaged and re-used in various local buildings, while itinerants often sheltered within the masonry that was still standing. The bailey areas that had once been thriving with activity became quiet grassy areas rented by farmers for producing hay, or for their grazing sheep.

1888 saw the arrival of the railway, which gave rise to a great many more visitors. This resulted in inns, shops and small hotels being built around the foot of the castle to provide sustenance and rest for the influx of tourists. The first guide books were written to give an account of the castle's dramatic history over the centuries – the age of the modern-day tourist industry had begun.

Ralph Bankes (1902-81) bequeathed the castle and the whole of the Bankes estate to the National Trust upon his death, which was one of the most generous donations in the National Trust's history. Although there had been some previous archaeological work, further excavations jointly funded by the National Trust and English Heritage were carried out between 1986 and 1997.

Corfe Castle is thought to have been the inspiration for Enid Blyton's Kirrin Island and it was used as a location for the 1957 film serial of *Five on a Treasure Island*, as well as the 1971 film *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*.

We'd enjoyed our Corfe Castle visit – we'd investigated towers, peered into nooks and crannies and climbed to the lofty heights, but it was time to leave and hopefully make a return visit one fine day, now we understood more of the history.



Lofty heights (photo by Alan Santillo)

27th July 2023

Exactly one year and two days later, we returned to Corfe Castle, this time with our daughter Rachel and 9-year old Léa, both keen on castles and history 😊. Once again, the weather wasn't all that wonderful, but this time we already knew the layout of Corfe village and after parking in an already busy car park, we took the path opposite to the steep one we'd climbed the previous year, which offered some different views of the castle's boundaries.

Then, once we'd emerged close to the National Trust tea shop, it made perfect sense to go in for a cappuccino and a mid-morning shared cookie (large).



From the keep down to the outer bailey (photo by Alan Santillo)

We'd been surprised on our first sight of the castle that there was a hazy layer of mist, but this didn't seem to have affected the number of visitors already enjoying the vibrant atmosphere within the grounds. The National Trust had done much to make it of interest to both children and adults, with various activities, information boards, an audio trail telling the story of the castle through the ages and the old favourite, a quiz sheet (with a small prize at the end – very important).

While Rachel and Léa focused on the quiz sheet, Alan and I focused on taking photos of the areas we'd missed on our previous year's visit, which were mostly some of the towers of this post-Norman Conquest castle.



The Plukenet tower

It was refreshing to be with Léa and her young, enquiring mind, as we attempted to impart what knowledge we had. For instance, we enjoyed discussing the need for arrow slits in the shape they were, for both attack and defence purposes.



A discussion about arrow slits (photo by Alan Santillo)

Léa was also very interested in the Butavant tower with its oubliette, bearing in mind she is half-French and understands the language well, although it seemed wrong to dwell on the fact that the French word *oublier* refers to how prisoners were cast into the underground dungeon and forgotten.

King John's once luxurious addition to the castle, referred to as the 'gloriette', was another place of interest. During some conservation work in 2009, tiny areas of paint had been discovered tucked into the arch of a doorway in the gloriette ruins. The colours red, white and black were arranged in a chequerboard pattern, somewhat resembling a chess or drafts board. This was the only painted surface found in the castle and may very possibly date back to the reign of King John.

We became separated in the gloriette area, due to Alan's photographic stops, but once or twice I caught glimpses of Rachel and Léa through windows and archways, as I waited for Alan to finish taking his photos. Also, I may have loitered to take a photo or two of some very fine window stonework:



Some fine stonework in the gloriette

The climb up to the top of the keep found us in some decidedly misty air, but as on our previous visit, the scale of the castle's destruction as a result of the English Civil War (1642-51) remained absolutely mind-boggling and clearly demonstrated the building's indomitable strength. The view of the surrounding countryside was also just about mistily visible, which added to the 'castle atmosphere'.

We carefully wended our way downwards, with Léa fascinated by the history of Lady Banks and her unquestionable bravery at literally 'holding the fort' for the Royalists in the Civil War. She asked many questions (some of which I could answer), although the National Trust had already done an excellent job of describing the salient points in a series of notice boards down by the gatehouse entrance. She had stopped to read them all, which to my mind is commendable.

We all seemed slightly reluctant to leave and were therefore diverted by what was on offer, including some demonstrations of how castle life would have been in medieval times. It struck me how the National Trust do a wonderful job at sparking children's interest in the sites they look after and there was also a reward for the completed quiz, too, in the form of a small wooden medallion. I found myself slightly envious that such incentives hadn't existed when I was a child...

It never ceases to amaze me how much can be learned after a visit, which can be a little frustrating, but fascinating nonetheless. After this visit, I found out that during an excavation of the old hall in 1948-1952, the bodies of two men and a baby had been uncovered. It's thought that these were probably casualties from the castle's sieges in 1643 and 1646, when the dead would have had to be buried in the castle, rather than in the parish churchyard under normal circumstances.

For me, I was most interested in examples of medieval reproductions of particular building features that National Trust volunteers were undertaking, down by the Horseshoe Tower, by using traditional stone working tools. The wooden 'centering' structure would be removed, of course, once the arch was self-supporting. I also admired a display of decorative stonemasonry, marvelling at the necessary skill and precision (and wondering how many costly mistakes may have been made).

On his 1878 death certificate, my great-great grandfather's occupation is 'master mason', a title usually referring to a stonemason. He had died from "pleuritic effusion, tuberculosis of the lung" at the age of 28 and I can't help wondering if inhaling the stone dust of his trade contributed to his early death. I have no doubt that our incredible historic buildings came at a human cost and also no doubt that this second visit to Corfe Castle (or third, even though the first visit has been lost in the mists of time) was both valuable and enjoyable – Léa thought so, too!



The making of an arch



Decorative stonemasonry



What did she do?!