RICHMOND CASTLE

Riverside Road, Tower Street, Richmond, North Yorkshire DL10 4QW

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During a holiday in Hawes, we discovered that Richmond Castle was about 25 miles away, so off we motored along some very picturesque roads until we arrived at the market town of Richmond, situated at the edge of the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Richmond's Norman castle, Georgian architecture, museums, monuments and a large cobbled market place gave the impression of a town worth visiting on its own merit, but unfortunately our time was limited.

English Heritage has looked after the castle since 1984. The site has no car park of its own, but parking in nearby Market Square was no trouble and by the time we'd walked up the hill to the famous fortification, the sun was shining. Although mainly in ruins like so many castles, it was easy to see how this had once been a great Norman fortress, standing on a cliff overlooking the River Swale. Richmond was originally known as Riche Mont, meaning 'rich hill' in Old French.

The exact circumstances that led to the building of Richmond Castle in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest remain unclear, although it was most probably founded by Count Alan Rufus, 1st Lord Richmond (c.1040-93) – known as Alan the Red, or alternatively Alanus Rufus (Latin), Alan ar Rouz (Breton) or Alain le Roux (French). Whichever label he preferred, he was a Breton nobleman and a companion of William the Conqueror (c.1028-87, reign from 1066).

At the Battle of Hastings, Alan had commanded the Breton contingent of the Norman army and was rewarded by William in around 1071 with a significant English fiefdom covering parts of eight counties, amounting to one of the most extensive Norman estates in England and later known as the Honour of Richmond. The castle had very likely been started soon afterwards to ensure royal control in the north and to keep vigilance over Scotland's border, which at that time was further south. In the Domesday Book of 1086, a reference is made to Alan's lands forming a "castlery", an estate which was organised to support a castle.

Part of the 11th-century wall

Richmond was distinguished by having one of the first Norman stone-built fortifications, whereas the majority of places had to suffice with wood and earthworks. Stone was, in fact, uncommon in the building of castles until well into the 12th century. The earliest surviving buildings of Richmond Castle were probably constructed in the 1080s by Alan Rufus. These included the long stone curtain wall and the large archway in the ground floor of the keep.

The 11th-century hall block has been known as Scolland's Hall since at least 1400 and is one of England's earliest surviving examples of domestic architecture. Since no other English castle contains as much surviving 11th-century architecture, Richmond Castle is considered one of the very best-preserved castles of this standing (that is, still standing) in the country.

After Alan Rufus died in 1093, Richmond Castle and estates passed to his younger brother Alan Niger (Alan the Black – was it a hair colour thing?) It then passed to another brother Stephen (hair colour unknown), but by 1136, it was held by Stephen's son, Alan the Black II (c. 1100-46). He was the first Earl of Richmond and married Bertha, heiress of the Duke of Brittany, but unfortunately died before possessing the dukedom. It was during his ownership that the castle may have possessed a mint that issued coins in support of the embattled King Stephen.

Alan II's son Conan (c.1135-71) managed to successfully assert his claim to the dukedom of Brittany in the 1150s, thus effectively combining two extensive inheritances of Richmond and Brittany. Known as Duke Conan IV of Brittany, he began to take control over his English lands from 1154, spending much time at Richmond over the next decade. It was almost certainly during this period that the keep was built as an assertion of his great wealth and power.

The honey-coloured keep

Made of honey-coloured sandstone and standing at 100 feet/30 metres high, with walls 11 feet/3.4 metres thick, it still looks very grand and imposing as it literally towers over the ruins. Research undertaken by English Heritage suggests that an upper room in the tower may have contained a raised platform for castle officers and possibly also dukes. Richmond had become prosperous by then, having already achieved the privileged status of borough as early as 1145.

In 1166, Conan betrothed his daughter Constance to King Henry II's fourth son, Geoffrey (1158-86). As part of the agreement, he ceded the duchy of Brittany to the king, which meant that he forfeited his remarkable joint inheritance. Upon Conan's death in 1171, Constance was only nine and so King Henry II (1133-89, reign from 1154) took over control of the castle. Records show that several buildings were repaired or improved by new work during 1171-4, including the tower and houses belonging to the castle.

Constance and Geoffrey eventually married in 1181, although the castle remained under royal jurisdiction until King John (1166-1216, reign from 1199) died. Unlike other royal castles in the north, there is no evidence to suggest that King John made any improvements to Richmond.

A group of landowners, with a French army under the future King Louis VIII of France, rebelled against King John during the First Barons' War (1215-17). King John had signed the Magna Carta on 15 June 1215, but was stubbornly refusing to abide by it. There is no record of a siege, but Roald de Richmond, the fourth constable of Richmond Castle, was one of those opposing the king. As part of a military campaign in the north, King John attacked Richmond and evicted Roald, imprisoning his garrison in the castle until January 1216.

In 1265 during the Second Barons' War (1264-67), Simon de Montfort, who had rebelled against King Henry III during the civil wars of the 1260s, called for his supporters to lay siege to Richmond Castle. Unfortunately, if there ever was a siege, no details were recorded.

During the 13th and 14th centuries, the international situation was odd. The Honour of Richmond was still held by the dukes of Brittany, but this required obedience to the king of England. On the other hand, holding their French lands meant allegiance to the French king. Since the two kings were often at war, this was impossible to negotiate, resulting in the castle and the Honour being confiscated at times and held by the English Crown or a royal favourite. The impasse continued until 1372, when both the castle and the Honour were surrendered to the Crown.

It appeared to have little effect on the castle buildings, with the only recorded work having being undertaken by King Henry II in 1250 and King Edward I (1239-1307, reign from 1272) after 1294. The latter probably instigated the building of the vault in the keep, the restoration of Scolland's Hall, additions to the residential range along the east walls and the construction of the south-west tower.

During this unsettled period, the dukes who intermittently ruled Richmond also invested in it. In 1278, for instance, Duke John II (1239-1305) made an agreement with Egglestone Abbey to provide six canons to serve at the castle's chapel to pray for the soul of his late wife Beatrice. This building no longer exists, but was most likely in the south-west corner of the castle enclosure.

Richmond was at the receiving end of a debilitating Scottish raid after the English defeat at Bannockburn in 1314 – but the castle was 'fortuitously' spared (an apt word for a castle). Despite the exact details being unclear, the only other known attack was when a group of locals besieged the castle in around 1340 and injured the Duke of Brittany's servants there.

It seemed that the castle was in a state of some disrepair at that time, having fallen out of use as a fortress by the end of the 14th century. Despite occasional repairs being carried out over the years, the castle seems to have gradually sunk into a state of ruin. A survey in 1538 showed how it was derelict, while another survey in 1609, revealed that it was "decayed".

By 1462, when King Edward IV (1442-83, reign from 1461) granted the castle and lands of Richmond, but not the title of earl, to his brother George, Duke of Clarence (1449-78), the castle was a symbolic asset rather than a practical one. Despite this, part of the castle was still being used, as expensive glass was imported from northern Europe in the 16th century to refurbish the chapel in Robin Hood Tower.

Robin Hood Tower

This tower was also abandoned in due course, although traces of red paint are still visible on the altar arch. Interestingly, English Heritage state that its name was probably a product of Victorian romanticism. This seems likely, considering the Victorians' predilection for strange romantic ideas.

As for the castle, it remained in a dilapidated condition for the following 300 years. Ownership was passed to the dukes of Richmond in 1675, but repairs appear to have been scarce, apart from when Charles Lennox, 3rd Duke of Richmond (1735-1806) made some improvements in the 1760s, mainly to the keep.

In the late 18th to early 19th centuries, artists portrayed the castle as a fashionably romantic ruin, which led to the town becoming a popular place for tourists. In 1854, the Duke of Richmond leased the castle to the North Yorkshire Militia, who used it as their headquarters. The following year, a military barrack block was constructed in the great courtyard. The keep was used as a depot and a range constructed beside the main castle gate, intended as a reserve armoury.

In 1908, Richmond Castle became headquarters to the Northern Territorial Army. Robert Baden-Powell (later founder of the Boy Scouts) was its commander until 1910, which was the same year the army handed over the historic structure of the castle to the Ministry of Works, while retaining control of the buildings themselves.

During World War I, the castle became a base for the northern Non-Combatant Corps. This was a military unit that allowed conscientious objectors to contribute to the war effort in non-fighting roles. However, some men refused to engage in any war work at all, because it was against their fundamental beliefs. In 1916, some were detained in cells at Richmond Castle, in a 19th-century building beside the castle gate that had previously been the castle's reserve armoury.

The walls of these small rooms are still covered in graffiti made by the objectors, an example of first-hand history. A group known as the "Richmond Sixteen" was sent from the castle in May 1916 to France, where they were court-martialled and sentenced to be executed by firing squad. This sentence was commuted to ten years' hard labour and they were, in fact, released in 1919.

After World War I, the Borough Council of Richmond used the barrack block as housing, to help with the town's accommodation shortage. The castle 'cottages' were inhabited from 1920-28 and the barrack block was demolished in 1931.

During World War II, the keep became a daylight air raid shelter, while its roof was an excellent vantage point to watch for enemy activity. In 1940, prisoners were again detained in cells, although this time they were soldiers. Again, many of them left drawings and inscriptions on the cell walls, which was very poignant.

A view for miles and miles and miles…

It was time to explore, which firstly meant climbing to the top of the tower and looking out at an extensive vista. It was easy to see why the castle had been built in such a strategic location, with a bird's eye view of the town and countryside beyond. Looking down on the castle remains, the 11th-century curtain wall was an excellent example of such early fortification and must have been impressive in its entirety. All the main medieval domestic buildings would have stood against this wall, making it a practical and thriving community.

Along the east curtain wall were three square towers, the northernmost being the 11th-century Robin Hood Tower. The collapsed middle tower is logically referred to as the Fallen Tower, but the southernmost tower still standing at its full height, is known as the Gold Hall Tower. Perhaps this name came from the fact that it contained the castle's garderobes – but I don't really think so.

Building remains against the east curtain wall – Cockpit on the left

Remains of the great hall and the inner apartments of the Richmond lords also stand against the east curtain wall, with lines of square sockets in the walls indicating that the buildings were two storeys high. In the 16th century, the three upper rooms of this range were described as forming a great chamber, a chapel and a chapel chamber. The chapel is easily identified by its piscina and the remains of a large west window. The whole range is thought to date from around 1300.

The 11th-century block known as Scolland's Hall adjoins the great chamber on the south curtain wall. Although our impromptu visit to this castle was good, I would love to make a further planned visit, as I was unaware at the time of how Scolland's Hall is both valued and interesting. It acquired its name from one of the castle's long-serving stewards, which is fame indeed for a steward.

The two-storey hall block had its main apartments on the first floor above an undercroft, typical of early Norman and Anglo-Norman domestic architecture. The undercroft would probably have been used for storage, with rectangular windows on the south side. The great hall on the upper floor, being the main domestic interior of the castle, would have occupied nearly the complete length of the block, with large windows along both sides.

A small withdrawing chamber, or solar, was situated at the east end, separated from the hall by a stone wall. This would have been handy for Count Alan Rufus or his deputy to relax or sleep in, if they felt the need to escape from the hall. On reflection, I would rather like a solar. There is also evidence that a balcony existed outside the east wall, which overlooked the castle garden that was later known as the Cockpit. Yes, I would also like a balcony…

In the 12th century, the hall block was extended, with three doors in the west wall giving access to a kitchen, pantry and buttery. I must admit my ignorance, as up until now I assumed a buttery was a place for making butter. This is not so! A buttery was where butts were stored – that is, large casks of beer and wine. It was close to the great hall, from where the yeoman of the buttery would serve beer and candles to the lower household members not entitled to drink wine.

The keep as it is now has evolved from many periods of building and repair. The first phase was the original 11th-century main gate archway that is now in the basement of the newer 12th-century keep built in front of it. This new keep was probably built on the orders of Duke Conan, following the tradition of square keeps introduced in England by William the Conqueror.

It has four square turrets on top, each face decorated with shallow buttresses. Three ornamented windows on the first floor, directly overlooking the market place, may have served as balconies from where Duke Conan would make public appearances to the minions below.

A modern flat-top roof is countersunk within the tower, making it much easier for modern-day visitors to manoeuvre. The original roof rose from the same level, but sloped upwards to a point. The parapets definitely made great viewing places.

The modern flat roof of the well-preserved keep

The keep's interior was accessed through a door at first-floor level, but a modern stair now does the job. Having said this, a survey of 1538 records an earlier building that housed an entrance stair. This was neither fortified, nor built of stone and no signs of its remains have been found.

The current entrance intriguingly opens to a small anteroom with two more doorways. The right-hand door leads into the first-floor room, which is a high chamber with a central pillar. From the left-hand door, a straight stair ascends to the second floor. At the top is a second anteroom, which was most probably a waiting area for the main second-floor chamber. This splendidly large room opens to the roof and probably served as a great hall, with a dais beneath two windows at the room's far end.

After we'd finished our wandering around the ruins, having had the castle almost completely to ourselves, we took some time perusing a most informative exhibition of the castle's history, from the 11th century to the time when the conscientious objectors were incarcerated there during World War I. This was decidedly thought-provoking. Seeing direct evidence always has the effect of bringing a previously objective situation to life and it can be uncomfortable – but better for the truth to be known.

Upon leaving the actual castle buildings, we ventured outside the curtain wall to the area known as the Cockpit. This name is presumed to be an expression of its earlier use as a literal cock pit, where the hideous and popular sport of cockfighting took place in the 16th to 18th centuries.

However, it's extremely likely to have been a garden from the castle's beginnings in the 11th century, since a royal survey made in around 1280 records a garden "pertaining to the castle". What could be clearer? Furthermore, a later illustration from about 1400 shows the Cockpit area planted with fruit trees, which is a much more agreeable scenario. Finally, excavation of the Cockpit has revealed evidence of some 19th-century gardens, including paths, a glasshouse and remains of ornamental flower beds.

In 2002, English Heritage opened the current garden, after having commissioned the designer Neil Swanson. A special touch is a piece of topiary for each of the Richmond Sixteen. We found it to be a very peaceful place, which we enjoyed sitting in for a short while in nea- solitude.

The peaceful Cockpit (devoid of fighting cocks)

There had been very few people in the castle all the time we'd been there, which I must admit added to the pleasure of the visit. As we left through the castle shop, we found out from the English Heritage employee there *why* there was a lack of visitors. She explained that the Second Battalion of the Yorkshire Regiment had been given the freedom of Richmond and were due to parade through the town with their bayonets. They were celebrating their return from a 6-month tour in Afghanistan, where two of their regiment had sadly been killed.

An attempt was made to hurry back to the car park to avoid a potential traffic hold-up, but as we approached the car park, we heard the band. Then they were there, lots of them marching down the road, creating an impressive and moving sight. I was secretly pleased we'd been caught up in the parade – Richmond had been such a good place for a spur of the moment visit.

Given the freedom of Richmond