Keeping control

King William the Conqueror and his barons knew they had to protect the land they had taken from the English barons, so after 1066 they began to construct castles. These castles were a visual reminder of the military power and wealth of the new rulers and a way of protecting themselves.

A hive of activity

Castles took many years to build, and once built they required large numbers of workers to maintain. A castle was like the head office of a large company and the lord was like a CEO. At times, a lord owned more than one castle so he needed reliable workers to keep the business going in his absence. Reeves and bailiffs oversaw and organized the peasants’ work and collected rent, clerks were like accountants and solders kept the property safe. In order to best survive a siege, castles were often self-sufficient, with animals, orchards and vegetable gardens.

The location of a castle was crucial; it needed to be easy to defend and from it, lords needed to be able to control the surrounding area. For this reason many castles are found on hills, at crossroads or near major rivers.

Defending a castle

A The drawbridge was a thick door that could be raised, but being heavy, it took time to raise.
B The portcullis was a gate made of iron that could be dropped very quickly to defend the entrance.
C High, smooth and thick walls had parapets that protected the defenders whilst they fired arrows on their attackers.
D A moat often surrounded the castle, it was filled with water and often had very steep sides.
E loopholes were windows with narrow openings to allow defenders to fire arrows
F The sheep was surrounded by another curtain wall and was where the main castle was located.
G machicolation is a floor opening between the wall of a battlement through which stones, burning objects or hot liquids could be dropped on attackers at the base of a defensive wall.
H Outer curtain wall

Source 2.19: Castles were built to withstand attack.

Source 2.20: Weapons used to attack castles

A mangonel
B ballista
C trebuchet
D bally
E battering ram

Activities

1 Refer to Sources 2.19 and 2.20.
   a) Explain the reasons for the design of the castle.
   b) Explain how each weapon is designed to attack the castle.
   c) Which weapons do you think would have been most successful?
   d) Research one of the weapons and explain its design and how it was used. Trade your knowledge with four other students to learn about the other weapons.

2 Visit www.castlewales.com.au/maps.html. View at least five images of castles, noting important facts about where they are located, the surrounding geography and features of each castle’s construction.

3 Research other castle defences and design your own castle with notes to explain your defences. Have a classmate challenge your design, explaining how they would attack your castle. Use this information to strengthen your castle plans.