The castle as a home

The most imposing buildings in the medieval landscape were castles, built to defend the people, land and property owned by the king and nobles. They were also the base from where nobles ruled their lands, conducted their business dealings, and collected taxes. The local court, collected rent and handed out punishments. Here lavish entertainments were held for important visitors, including feasts, hunting, hawking and performances by minstrels.

Castle employees

A large staff was needed to run the castle efficiently. The constable was in charge of military defence, the marshal looked after the outdoor household and the chamberlain the indoor household. A chaplain would oversee the priest, almoner and clerk. Most food, drinks and goods were grown or made on the noble’s lands. The castle employed everyone from longbow men and carpenters, to cooks and clerks.

The most powerful nobles owned more than one castle and lived an itinerant life. When they decided to move it was the job of the marshal to pack up the castle. All the furniture, clothes, bedding, the kitchen pots and pans, family pets and animals had to be transported by cart to their next home and then unpacked.

Changes to castle design

From 1070 wealthy nobles began replacing their wooden castles with square stone keep. These four-storey towers dominated the landscape. Many were painted white inside and out. They were surrounded by a wall and many wooden outbuildings including the stables, kitchens, mews, stables and the blacksmith’s forge. The keep was where the lord’s family, knights and staff could hold out against a siege. Walls were built up to four metres thick, with only narrow slits for windows.

The great hall was the heart of the keep. This huge room was a meeting room where the lord held court and made decisions, a place to eat and socialise, pray and at night sleep on straw mattresses. Even though the great hall was painted and decorated with tapestries and carved furniture, it was still draughty, dark, cold and smoky. (Chimneys hadn’t been invented.) Windows were slits to stop arrows entering. The noble family sometimes had their own solar (small living area) but the rest of the castle inhabitants lived together with little privacy or space.

Castle design had changed by 1350. As well as the best defence system, nobles also wanted comfort, privacy and a building to reflect their importance. Separate rooms were built for eating, sleeping, entertaining, bathing and meetings. Windows were glazed and enlarged to let the light in; chimneys drew the smoke away and carpets brought back from the crusades covered the stone floors. As the castles became more comfortable, etiquette became more important. Tablecloths, forks and handkerchiefs were used at the dining table for the first time.

Activities

1. Some builders preferred circular keeps to square keeps, believing that square keeps were more vulnerable to attack. Identify the weakness in the square keep.

2. Find the words in Source 3.4 that indicate the castle is mainly used for defence.

3. Research what these people did in the castle. Who would they work under?

   - Page Turners
   - Gatesmen
   - Warden

4. Write two real-estate advertisements for the sale of a castle; one to be sold in the year 1080 and another in 1370.