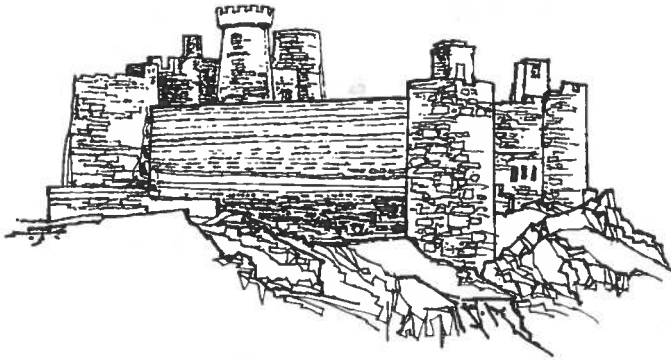


Life in a Medieval Castle

Beginning during the Early Middle Ages, the medieval castle was to become the home of many lords and ladies of the nobility. The word castle comes from the Latin word, *castelum*, which means “fort.” Such places were originally simple fortified camps, first built by the Romans, and later by European nobility and military leaders.



Early versions of the castle were constructed by the Normans. Many were built following the defeat of the Saxons by William in 1066, to provide protection for the Norman forces occupying medieval England. These early castles were constructed on top of an earthen mound called a *motte*. A wooden fort was built commanding the lands around the motte and enclosed by a *bailey*, a wooden-fenced stockade. The motte-and-bailey castle could be thrown up in just a few weeks.

By 1100, England alone had at least 500 such castles. The completion of most castles was followed by the building of a small village for the local people. In time, many of these wooden fortifications were replaced by castles of stone and mortar.

These later models were large and imposing, designed to serve not only as a fort or defensive stronghold, but as home to the lord and his family as well as armory, local governmental center, prison, and treasure house. Such castles often took hundreds of laborers and years to build.

The castles of the High Middle Ages became elaborately constructed fortifications. While there is no standard model, and castles varied widely from one to another, a typical castle included high, thick, stone walls. Built within the walls were round towers called *merlons* from which the castle's defenders

could fire arrows on their enemies. Inside the castle was a large, open courtyard lined with the lord's living quarters, as well as his chapel, workshops, kitchens, and servant's rooms.

Life there was secure and simple. Typically, the noble and his family attended chapel each morning. Time was spent throughout the day in a variety of ways. The lord might oversee his lands outside the castle, confer with his knights, practice his war arts, keep records of trade, and engage in an occasional pastime of chess, backgammon, or cards. The lady of the castle often spent time sewing and raising the children.

Servants were everywhere, carrying out the chores of cooking, keeping animals, tending gardens, and seeing to the needs of lord and lady. Meals were prepared in large open kitchens with broad fireplaces.

Dinners were served in a great hall, which was the central room within the castle. Here, banquets might be held, affairs of state carried out, and entertainment performed. Such halls were often decorated with large tapestries or other embroidered hangings that showed hunting or Biblical scenes. On the floor, straw was scattered about. Here people often sat, for furniture in a castle was scant. The lord might sit in a chair (we use the term *chairman* to refer to one who presides over a meeting for this reason).

Castles were generally cold places. Fireplaces were built in later castles, while earlier ones featured a fire built in the center of the great hall. Bedrooms were often chilly places. Medieval lords and ladies wore several layers of clothing to stay warm.

Despite popular myth, medieval people enjoyed taking baths. A castle might include a “bath room” near the kitchen (where hot water was prepared). “Toilets” were built into the walls of the castle. This allowed waste to drop down a chute and into the moat of water surrounding the castle.

Review and Write

What do you think would have been the most uncomfortable part of life in a medieval castle?