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Medieval castles



Castles are found all over the world, but they all have one thing in common. They were built by rich and powerful people, such as knights, kings or wealthy landowners, to defend and control the land around them. Castles were homes for a lord and his family and his guards. Among the other castle-dwellers were cooks and domestic servants, knights and their pages and squires, blacksmiths, carpenters, grooms and priests. There might also be minstrels and jesters to keep the lord amused. Overseeing all the castle activities was the steward.



In Europe, the earliest castles were little more than wooden forts, usually built on the top of a hill, called a motte. Sometimes there would be a small settlement next to the fort in an enclosure, called a bailey. Eventually, the wooden forts were replaced by stone buildings. These were much stronger and easier to defend. Called keeps or donjons, they were simply stone towers, with high walls and small windows.



As time went on, castles needed even stronger defences. These included a moat or ditch surrounding the castle, crossed by a drawbridge that could be raised when attackers approached. Thick walls were also built around castles, making it even more difficult for attackers to gain entry. Despite these measures, a long siege with special weapons could eventually bring down even the strongest of castles.

CHAPEL

The lord and his family will worship here several times a day. The chapel's beautiful stained glass windows are a sign of the lord's great wealth.

Wooden shutters cover crenelles—spaces from where archers can shoot

Merlons: high sections between crenelles

Machicolations: overhanging stone structures through which guards can shoot attackers below

CRENELLATIONS

The castle has been very sturdily built. It is well defended with strong walls topped by crenellations—jagged battlements with gaps, called crenelles, for archers to fire through. The lord had to get a special licence from the king to add these battlements to his castle. It is these that make castles different from any other building. If the lord had built the castle without the licence, the king could have seized it from him.

Roofs covered in pottery tiles

Chapel

Garderobe or latrine

THICK WALLS

The walls between towers are called curtain walls. To strengthen them, they have been built up to two metres thick. The outer and inner surfaces are made of stone blocks and the

Chimney

Great Hall

Stained glass windows

Well

Lord's standard

Crenellations

Limewashed walls

Arrow slit

gap between them infilled with rocks and mortar—a mixture of sand, lime and water. The walls are then limewashed (painted white) to protect against the rain and to give a smart finish.

Wall walk

ARROW SLITS

Narrow holes in the castle walls allow archers to shoot out, but it is almost impossible for the enemy to shoot back through them.

GREAT HALL

At the centre of the castle is the Great Hall. The lord carries out much of his business here. Meals are served in it too, and a fire is kept burning all year round. Many of the castle servants sleep in the Great Hall at night.

BOOKS

ALCHEMIST

Alchemists believe it is possible to turn ordinary metals into gold. They also try to find an "elixir of life" that will cure all human ills.

KITCHENS

One of the busiest and largest areas of the castle is the kitchens. The cooks, bakers, scullions and other kitchen servants work day and night to keep everyone in the castle fed. It's even busier here at feast times.

Castle life

The castle was completed a few years ago now, and life inside has settled into a routine. Many people are needed to keep the castle running smoothly—there is always plenty going on within its walls. The castle has never been attacked, but the lord insists his guards keep a careful look out, just in case.

