

Seeing and Believing: Looking out on Medieval Castle Landscapes

by

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Medieval castles were of course embedded within the landscape at multiple levels, while their owners and builders were active agents in its transformation in different ways. Castles were administrative hubs within a tenurial landscape of estates; they were centres of high-quality living that drew on the economic resources of their hinterlands; and they were part and parcel of a settlement landscape of farms, hamlets, villages and towns. The notion that castles could also be set within ‘designed’ settings intended for leisure, pleasure and visual display is also gaining favour in Britain; landscape archaeology in particular is revealing how frequently the settings of castles were manipulated to convey the imagery of lordship.¹

The notion of studying *the castle within its landscape* is now quite widely recognised within the subject.² In this short paper I will explore a variation on this theme: the idea of *the landscape within the castle* and, more explicitly, the landscape as perceived from the castle. We are relatively well accustomed to considering noble buildings from the perspective of external observers, looking in on these structures from the outside. But, to turn this concept inside-out, does a possibility also exist that castles themselves could have provided opportunities for viewing the medieval landscape? More specifically, does the architecture and use of space within castles suggest that views over surroundings could have been valued for reasons of status? An alternative view, of course, is that the often excellent observational qualities of castles can be related to their military functionality: it is a cliché of the castle guide-book that a given site ‘overlooks’ or ‘dominates’ features such as roads and river crossings, for example. In contrast, this paper focuses on the ‘civil’ landscape surrounding the castle. It considers the visibility from the castle of

¹ For an overview, see C. C. TAYLOR, Medieval ornamental landscapes, in: Landscapes 1.1 (2000), p. 38–55.

² For an overview, see OLIVER H. CREIGHTON, Castles and Landscapes, 2002.

settlements and the working landscape of fields and farms, as well as more recognisably elite features, such as deer parks and gardens.

Crucially, we should remember that inhabitants of the medieval world would not appreciate the surrounds of a castle in the manner of a landscape painting, or for its aesthetic beauty as understood in the modern sense. Rather, in the Middle Ages ‘landscape’ was something that was felt as well as something that was seen; the word has its medieval roots in the Dutch language (as *landscap*), its original meaning being the perception of the ability to live on the land, before its later history as a term to describe a view or vista from a particular point, especially in art.³ My paper makes a connection between these different understandings of landscape – between the castle ‘landscape’ as a tract of countryside that was lived in, and the ‘landscape’ as perceived from a designated viewing point.

My discussion starts with a brief review of the different sources of evidence from which we can start to reconstruct the view from the chamber window and the castle roof-top, before going on to consider the types of prospect that these spaces looked out on to. The final section draws these themes together by developing three case studies of castles from south-west England. This paper is a summary of a longer version published elsewhere,⁴ which itself draws on my book-length study of elite landscapes of the Middle Ages.⁵

1.

Naturalistic wall paintings as well as tapestries and hangings depicting hunting scenes were common ways in which landscape imagery was brought into domestic areas within castles. In contrast, roof-top walkways and windows within chambers provided direct views over tracts of the ‘real’ landscape that surrounded the castle. In the Middle Ages an elevated gaze over the landscape was something special and unusual, to be experienced by

³ R. VAN DE NOORT, A. O’SULLIVAN, Places, perceptions, boundaries and tasks: rethinking landscapes in wetland archaeology, in: *Archaeology from the Wetlands: Recent Perspectives*, eds. J. BARBER et al., 2007, p. 79–80.

⁴ OLIVER H. CREIGHTON, Room with a view: framing castle landscapes, in *Château Gaillard 24* (2010) p. 47–58.

⁵ OLIVER H. CREIGHTON, *Designs upon the Land: Elite Landscapes of the Middle Ages*, 2009.

a privileged minority. Especially important here are those upper-storey windows that were accompanied by window seats. These seats enabled, and perhaps encouraged, occupants to contemplate the view from a position of relative comfort, although this was obviously not their sole function (they were also used for writing and activities such as needlework). We have to be cautious, however, as surviving shells of medieval buildings can be misleading, sometimes giving the impression that window openings were bigger than they really were, while in other cases the barring or shuttering of windows would have partially obscured the view. Occasionally referred to as 'sitting windows' in medieval documents, incidental references confirm that they not uncommonly overlooked castle gardens, especially when they were positioned within high-status and private areas of domestic accommodation. Enclosed gardens positioned directly beneath bed chambers are recorded at the castles of Arundel, Gloucester, and Marlborough and Nottingham; at the royal palaces of Clarendon and Woodstock we have explicit references to windows or balconies overlooking garden spaces.⁶ Documents show that the elevated view over gardens may have been particularly characteristic of chambers provided for elite female members of the household, despite the fact that these were usually among the most inaccessible spaces within buildings, as Amanda Richardson has shown.⁷

On the wider European scene, late medieval pictorial and literary sources provide further insight into visual engagement with the scenery of noble landscapes from above. Flemish panel paintings sometimes show how the layout of gardens and their wider contexts could be appreciated from elevated perspectives. One particularly fine late-fifteenth-century example by a student of Hans Memling shows a prospect from a fortified manor house in the Netherlands in which a projecting oriel window frames a walled and crenellated garden, complete with summerhouse and a gridded arrangement of beds and walkways; the garden is visually linked via a pathway to a naturalistic parkland backdrop.⁸ The view of scenery from castle windows or from raised parapets also occurs occasionally as a motif in medieval romance literature. For instance, in Chrétien de Troyes' late-twelfth-century *Perceval*, the episode

⁶ OLIVER H. CREIGHTON, *Designs upon the Land: Elite Landscapes of the Middle Ages*, 2009, p. 168–179.

⁷ AMANDA RICHARDSON, *Gender and space in medieval palaces c. 1160–1547: a study in access analysis and imagery*, in: *Medieval Archaeology* 47 (2003) p. 131–165.

⁸ S. LANDSBERG, *The Medieval Garden*, 1996, p. 15.

‘The Wondrous Bed’ sees Gawain marveling at the landscape through windows on more than one occasion. He first admires the castle from windows set in the turrets of his waterside lodging, taking in the “vast terrain” of fields and woods. Once within the fortress he ascends a spiral stair to the top of a tower to take in a beautiful view over river, plain and a forest full of deer and birds.⁹



Fig. 1: View from the top of the South Tower of Stokesay castle (photograph: © Oliver Creighton).

We might also ask whether the physical remains of buildings themselves – in particular elevated towers and donjons – can show that they provided viewing opportunities. Or is the fact that windows and rooftops sometimes provided delightful prospects purely coincidental? Certainly the orientation of buildings and the choice of fenestration could ensure that certain landscape elements were exhibited to best effect, but key to understanding these viewing opportunities is how they were accessed. It is now well understood that the domestic planning of castles, especially those of the later medieval period,

⁹ R.H. CLINE, *Chrétien de Troyes: Perceval or the Story of the Grail*, 1985, p. 201–213.

channelled movement and manipulated the experience of architecture in sophisticated ways. In some cases it can be argued that access to views over landscapes was similarly controlled. Stokesay (Shropshire) (Fig. 1) serves as an illustrative example of a tower with private access to the rooftop, not least as it is a widely acknowledged example of a castle set within a designed landscape, with a route of approach across a causeway between two rows of shallow pools.¹⁰ Looking at this landscape as experienced from within the building, the south tower served as something of a vantage point: the spacious upper chamber featured five windows with window seats and its own private staircase leading to exquisite views from a turret. From the parapet were showcased all the quintessential symbols of *rural* lordship – hunting grounds, mill, dovecote and parish church (even though the site was built by a member of the *urban* classes, being licensed to the merchant Nicholas de Ludlow in 1281). An alternative arrangement that gives evidence of private access to tower-top views is the provision of duplicate stairs to the roof, one leading directly from the lord's chamber and another of more 'public' character, which seems to be more characteristic of larger donjons, such as Warkworth (Northumbria).¹¹

A small but important group of medieval buildings providing rather more direct evidence that the fenestration of domestic apartments could be intended, at least in part, to provide pleasing views, are those chambers identified as *Gloriettes*. Three British examples within castles are known, all dating to the thirteenth century: Chepstow (Monmouthshire), Corfe (Dorset) and Leeds (Kent). These were private lodgings of exceptional status, furnished with stylish architecture and carrying exotic connotations derived from the world of romance literature, as demonstrated by Jeremy Ashbee.¹² They also have in common elevated positions at the tops of buildings that looked out on attractive vistas. The principal window within the gloriette at Chepstow looked down the gorge of the Wye valley; those at Corfe gazed from high on the Purbeck ridge towards the coast; and the island gloriette at Leeds was set within an artificial lake.

¹⁰ R. LIDDIARD, *Castles in Context*, 2005, p. 44–46.

¹¹ T. MCNEILL, *The view from the top*, in: *Les Cahiers de l'Urbanisme*, ed. D. SARLET, 2006, p. 122–127.

¹² J.A. ASHBEE, "The chamber called gloriette": living at leisure in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century castles, in: *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 157 (2004) p. 17–40.

Yet the ‘view from the top’ was not only a feature of later medieval castle design. There are hints that the idea was present from the very earliest period of castle building. For example, at Langeais (Indre-et-Loire) the donjon of c. AD 1000 featured an external timber gallery linked to the living space on the upper storey; built across the east face of the building between two projecting towers, it has been interpreted as a belvedere-type feature, from which exquisite views over the river valley could be admired.¹³ To external observers this side of the donjon presented a strikingly ordered and symmetrical architectural composition, rising above its naturally dominant setting (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Langeais: view of the donjon, showing the former position of an external balcony-type feature (photograph: © Oliver Creighton).

If standing building analysis can provide hints that castles provided opportunities for viewing their environs in a structured way, is it possible to work in the opposite direction and look for evidence in surrounding

¹³ E. IMPEY, E. LORANS, Langeais, Indre-et-Loire. An archaeological and historical study of the early Donjon and its environs’, in: *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 151 (1998) p. 68–94.

landscapes of features that were intended to be seen? In some cases large expanses of water were exhibited, with lakes, meres and ponds having aesthetic as well as utility value. Best known is the example of Kenilworth (Warwickshire), where window seats in John of Gaunt's Hall overlooked an enormous artificial mere that completely dominated the view. Elsewhere, water occupied the foreground and a deer park provided a backdrop; this was the view from the chamber windows of Framlingham (Suffolk), for example.



Fig. 3: Medieval garden at Haverfordwest Priory (Pembrokeshire) reconstructed on the basis of archaeological excavation on the site (photograph: © Oliver Creighton).

The elevated prospect over an adjacent deer park emerges as another recurring theme. Particularly important here is the evidence for 'little parks' that directly adjoined and in some cases enveloped residences. Especially popular from the fourteenth century onwards, little parks were usually separate from much larger parks dedicated to deer farming; documentary descriptions and archaeological fieldwork shows that they often equated to pleasure grounds and had semi-ornamental functions, the exemplar in England being Windsor (Berkshire). Finally, medieval garden archaeology can occasionally remind us that arrangements of knots and ornamental beds

could be appreciated from above, especially from windows that looked down on to enclosed herbers within courtyards. At Haverfordwest Priory (Pembrokeshire), a gridded arrangement of beds beneath an upper storey monastic lodging suggests exactly this (Fig. 3).¹⁴ Equivalent investigations at castle sites are rare indeed, although Pontefract (West Yorkshire), Stafford (Staffordshire) and Portchester (Hampshire) are among the small number of medieval castles where archaeological survey or excavation has revealed gardens intended to be appreciated from domestic lodgings that overlooked them.¹⁵

2.

Having established a basis for considering the view from the castle as something that could be deliberately constructed and had status value in its own right, the following section develops three brief case studies from the southwest of England, in order to explore these ideas in more detail (Fig. 4).

Okehampton castle (Devon) was built along a natural ridge on the northern fringes of the upland mass of Dartmoor in the late eleventh century. The site gained its present form around c. 1300, when the castle's domestic quarters were extensively rebuilt and upgraded by the Courtenay family. We can reconstruct the castle's plan at this date in some detail on the basis of extensive excavations carried out between 1972–1980 as well as building records.¹⁶ The residential focus of the site was the southern part of the bailey enclosure, where three comfortable first-floor chambers were provided with fireplaces, rib-vaulted garderobes and plastered walls; they were also equipped with especially fine two-light windows (the only part of the castle where they were built), and generously proportioned window seats. What makes Okehampton castle particularly compelling as an example of a

¹⁴ S.E. REES, *The secret garden*, in: *Heritage in Wales* 6 (1996) p. 11–13.

¹⁵ B. CUNLIFFE, J. MUNBY, *Excavations at Portchester Castle IV: Medieval, the Inner Bailey*, 1985. J. DARLINGTON (ed.), *Stafford Castle: Survey, Excavation and Research 1978–1998*, I – *The Surveys*, 2001. I. ROBERTS, *Pontefract Castle: archaeological excavations 1982–86*, 2002.

¹⁶ R.A. HIGHAM, *Excavations at Okehampton Castle, Devon 1: the motte and keep*, in: *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society* 35 (1977) p. 3–42. R.A. HIGHAM, J.P. ALLAN, S.R. BLAYLOCK, *Excavations at Okehampton castle, Devon 2: the bailey*, in: *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society* 40 (1982) p. 19–151.

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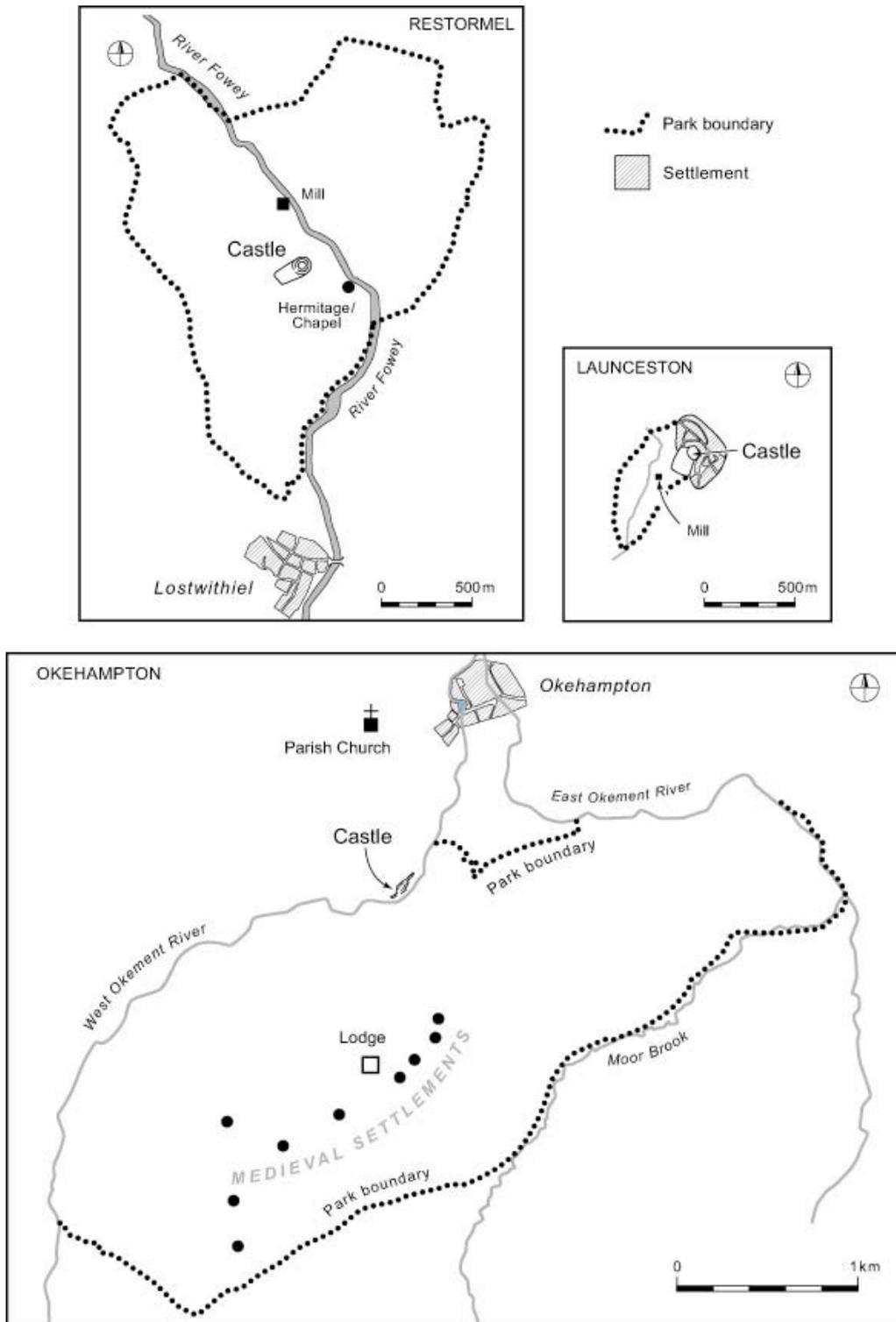


Fig.: 4 Relationships between castles, deer parks and settlements at Okehampton, Launceston and Restormel (illustration: Mike Rouillard).

medieval residence that provided guests and residents with carefully structured views of its surroundings is the sharply contrasting appearance of the site's opposite (north-facing) side. From this point of view a thick curtain wall, completely absent on the 'private' south side of the site, confronted visitors or travellers along the road that skirted what was the 'public' face of the castle. From here the site comprised an unmistakably military façade without any windows or any appearance of domestic character. In contrast, the large windows on the south side ensured that the lodgings would have caught the sun but also looked directly out on to the designer-wilderness of a large seigneurial deer park and hence views of the chase. The park was developed after the 1290s from unenclosed traditional hunting grounds, the deer park enveloping the entire southern aspect of the site. As viewed from the lodgings, the park pale (or boundary) lay just out of sight over the horizon. Settlements were not part of this private view. Medieval hamlets within the area of the park may have been abandoned when the area was enclosed, or at least those that were visible from the castle. The borough of Okehampton, which had been planted in the late eleventh century to the north of the castle, was also out of sight. The park therefore completely dominated the 'viewshed' (or area of terrain that was intervisible with this part of the site). The impression was thus of private parkland almost without limits, with the rugged slopes of Dartmoor providing a more distant backdrop.

Launceston castle (Cornwall) provides what is perhaps an even more striking candidate for a masonry structure designed to provide those permitted to enter it with a carefully contrived impression of 'designed' surroundings. The layout is known from Andrew Saunders' excavations on the site.¹⁷ The castle's 'High Tower' is a tall but relatively narrow circular masonry structure inserted into the centre of an earlier shell keep that surmounts a substantial motte. This unusual building was almost certainly built as the centrepiece of a major remodelling of the castle carried out in the mid to late thirteenth century by Richard, Earl of Cornwall, the immensely wealthy younger brother of Henry III, international politician and 'King of the Romans'. Construction of the High Tower created an elevated visual focus for the castle complex, but from within this was a building with a rather dark, cramped interior and without any obvious utility value. The room at the base of the High Tower

¹⁷ A.D. SAUNDERS, *Excavations at Launceston Castle, Cornwall*, 2006.

was unlit and completely featureless. Its unusual height raised the circular chamber above to a level that made the wall-walk of the earlier shell keep accessible. At this level a timber platform indicated by joist holes in the external face of the High Tower provided a continuous walkway. Within the upper chamber, in addition to a fireplace was provided a single large window embrasure with an accompanying window seat facing to the northwest. Crucially, it was on this (west) side of the site that a deer park had been created, occupying a shallow valley, with the water mill ('Castle Mill') located centrally within it. First recorded in the late thirteenth century but perhaps much earlier, the park occupied an oval area of no more than c. 700 x 280 metres. It was too small to have been a hunting park in any real sense; rather, its function was to provide a designed and exclusive prospect from the castle's innermost sanctum. Significantly, as at Okehampton, views from the highest status, most private spaces within the castle plan were uncluttered by settlement, the bustling town growing up around the opposite (east) side of the castle.

The third and final example is Restormel castle (Cornwall), set in splendid isolation amidst rolling countryside in the valley of the River Fowey. The castle is an oft-cited example of masonry 'shell keep' unusual for its almost perfectly circular form. Occupying the site of an earlier ringwork castle, the shell keep dates to the late thirteenth century and was probably built for Edmund, Earl of Cornwall in the period 1272–1300. The structure is therefore a generation later than Launceston's High Tower.¹⁸ The building's relationship with its landscape setting was different to Launceston in several important ways. Restormel castle was embedded in a more explicitly designed landscape. It lay at the very centre of a much larger deer park whose bowl-like topography secluded it from view. The impression from within was of parkland stretching as far as the eye could see. The seigneurial borough of Lostwithiel, originating in the late twelfth century but promoted by the castle lords and closely associated with the duchy in the late thirteenth century, lay beyond the park-gate. The borough was just on the very edge of what could be seen from the castle, emphasising its exclusivity. Other elements within

¹⁸ N. THOMAS, *Restormel Castle, a Re-appraisal* (Draft Report for Cornwall Archaeological Unit), 2000. For analysis of the deer park see P. HERRING, *Cornish medieval deer parks*, in: *The Lie of the Land: Aspects of the Archaeology and History of the Designed Landscape in the South West of England*, ed. R. WILSON-NORTH, 2003, p. 34–50.

this elite landscape included an isolated parkland hermitage chapel, a fishery, mill and a garden enclosure to the south, all recorded by the middle of the fourteenth century. While externally facing windows tend to be rare in shell keeps, here conspicuously large arched windows in the hall and solar provided exquisite parkland views across the valley. Provision of such large windows in the external face of a 'fortified' building would also have seriously compromised its defensibility. The site's dramatic but exclusive sylvan setting could also be admired from the circular parapet walk. Analysis of the shell keep's plan reveals that the 'inner hall' (actually a solar) was provided with direct access to the wall walk via a private stair within the thickness of the wall, in a way denied to other domestic spaces. Contemporary with the construction of the shell-keep, the earlier earthen defences of the earlier ring-work castle were re-landscaped. The exterior face of the masonry had spoil piled against it to create the illusion of a motte-top tower. Appearing to rise from a motte, the castle formed the visual focus of its exclusive hunting landscape; it was visible from almost everywhere within the deer park and, conversely, provided a vantage point from which this landscape could be seen.

3.

These three case studies show that lords had certainly come to value the views from private spaces within their residences by the late thirteenth century. This may even have been something of a period of experimentation with the 'design' of castle landscapes. What makes the central thesis of this paper contentious, however, is that the notion of looking outwards over an aesthetic landscape, whether from a garden or a building, is usually seen as an innovation of the Renaissance. In England, garden historians have seen the fashion for elevated views over designed scenery as associated with the palaces and gentry houses of the sixteenth century, with their 'outward looking' architecture, galleries and rooftop viewing platforms. Yet the evidence presented here highlights that in the medieval period designated viewing points – whether window seats in residential chambers or the parapets of buildings – could provide owners and their guests with artificial 'composed' views. Crucially, these were landscapes meant to display but also to conceal and to exclude – artificial environments to which access was tightly

controlled, commanding views that were carefully managed. The image they projected was one of elite authority rather than simple beauty and, together, buildings and their settings provided contrived environments for structuring networks of social power.

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