Before break of day on Monday, 2 February 1355, the feast of the Purification of the Virgin, the bishop of Salisbury presented himself at the bar of the Court of Common Pleas in the great hall of Westminster Palace. Bishop Wyville had come to the court to settle a long-running legal dispute by the most dramatic of means, a trial by combat, and the court yearbook enthusiastically reports every detail of the preliminaries. To assert his claim the bishop was joined at the bar by his champion, a certain Richard Shawell. The champion was dressed – as convention dictated – not in armour but in a long jerkin of white leather and a red silk surcoat painted with the arms of the bishop. Shawell’s battle-ax, the weapon conventional in such combats, was carried beside him by a knight, and standing behind the champion was a servant holding a specially shaped shield. As the group stood before the bar the servant raised this shield, which – we are told – was elaborately painted with figures, above the champion’s head. This action was probably intended to identify him to the court and the colours under which he fought, in this case almost certainly an image of the Virgin Mary, the patroness of Salisbury Cathedral.

The claim that Bishop Wyville had come to assert through force of arms was the ownership of the castle of Sherborne in Dorset, one of four outstandingly ambitious castles built in the early twelfth century by a predecessor of his, Roger, bishop of Salisbury from 1103 to 1139. The castle had been seized by the crown almost immediately after its construction, Bishop Roger having fallen into disgrace at the end of his life. But two centuries had not effaced the memory of this lost possession. When Edward iii granted Sherborne to William Montacute, earl of Salisbury, in 1337, Bishop Wyville immediately took the opportunity of its return into private hands to sue for recovery. The earl, a true tactician, responded by declaring his intention to defend his right by combat. This placed Wyville in an awkward position; as a cleric, combat was hardly an appropriate means for him to settle a lawsuit. But after having been advised by his lawyers that he must either fight or lose the case, he acceded to the challenge. At the same time he mobilised all the spiritual resources at his disposal to offer up devout prayers and masses for the happy outcome of the encounter.

Next to present himself at the bar was the defendant, the earl of Salisbury. His champion, Nicholas, was also dressed in a white leather jerkin and red surcoat, but this bore the arms of his master, Montacute. As before, the earl’s champion was displayed to
The gates are shown with portcullises, and barring the main entrance to the building is a bearded figure brandishing a battle pick in the garb of a champion. In a charming but important detail there are also several rabbits emerging from warren runs around the walls of the castle.

The inscription on the monument specifically identifies the castle as that of Sherborne and by extension the champion at the gates as Richard Shawell. It reads:

Here lies Robert Wyville, of happy memory, Bishop of the church of Salisbury, who ruled that church peaceably and laudably for more than forty-five years; he prudently defended the same church by hand of military might, and he also obtained restitution to the same church of the chase of Bere; who on the 4th day of September in the year of Our Lord 1375 and the 46th year since his consecration, as the Most High pleased, he rendered his debt of human nature in the said castle. May He, in whose power he hoped and believed, have mercy on his soul.

This monument makes a perfect introduction to this book because it clearly sets out some of the complications inherent in understanding castles and their architecture. ... would be to miss a crucial point: Wyville stands in a castle, and that meant something very special to a medieval audience. In this context the castle is not a reflection of Wyville’s ambition as a soldier, though it does boast of his determination to defend the rights of the see of Salisbury. Rather, it serves as a symbol of his temporal lordship, technically independent from his office as a bishop yet – as the inscription emphasises – inherited with it and essential to its prestige. The detail of the rabbit warren too – presumably a reference to his restitution of both the church and the state, dressed in the robes of the former and presented within the attributes of the latter.

As a whole, this image also articulates what might be understood as the user qualities or characteristics of the castle, a series of inextricably twisted strands of association that confront students of the subject like a Gordian knot. The castle is a symbol: Wyville presents Sherborne as an attribute of lordship and power. But the symbolism of the castle is effectively overwritten by its manifest physical strength: the castle appears imposing, fortified and threatening. Its character in these respects is enhanced by the busy composition of the architectural frame around the figure. The detail of this both adds to the splendour of the building and accentuates its function. As sports cars are admired for their sleek curves – curves that both suggest and permit driving at speed – so were castle fortifications clearly deemed beautiful for their appearance of deadly imprangibility. And Wyville’s castle looks marvelously imprangible. Bound up in this is an admiration for its manifest attributes. Because medieval and early modern society had a fighting class of noblemen and knights, so the architectural celebration of war evoked their prestige and power. In effect, castles were at once understood as symbolic, magnificent, powerful and prestigious buildings, each quality reinforcing the other.

As a final twist, it is worth making the obvious point that the castle on the monument is not properly a building at all but an image of one. Nor, as a matter of fact, does it bear the slightest physical similarity to the surviving ruins of Sherborne Castle (see pls 60 and 61). This illustrates a crowning and vitally important point that complicates but also enriches the task of this book immeasurably. The castle is an ideal, and one, moreover, that can be easily evoked. That is to say, if you make the right visual references an audience will recognise a castle in almost any object. Delight in this fact is widely apparent in medieval and early modern England, the forms of the castle appearing in everything from the architecture of churches to table cens. This also remains true today, too, as the
Books on castles necessarily begin by posing the question ‘what is a castle?’ And the response is consistently the same. A castle, we are told, is the private and fortified residence of a lord. By this definition castles seem relatively easy to identify. Their character as fortifications removes them from the sphere of merely domestic building and their role as lordly residences not only distinguishes them from forts or defended settlements but also places them in a specific European historical and social context: the feudal society of the Middle Ages. As conventionally represented, this feudal society was geared for the prosecution of war on horseback. Knights, the soldiery of such a society, were very expensive to equip and their expertise in the saddle the product of long training and experience. In combination, these circumstances conspired to create a professional fighting class maintained on agricultural wealth. Castles were the houses in which this class lived; by which they defended and managed their property; and from which they practised their profession.

It is important to understand that this definition has exerted a fixed picture of these buildings and their role in English history. In essentials, this picture might be...
This shortcoming in the literature expresses, and has served to reaffirm, a presumption scored deep into English historiography and the popular consciousness: that the Middle Ages were a time when war, politics, and the pursuit of justice were the primary concerns of society. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that, whether as a principal residence or as one in a suite of great residences, a castle was like a knight without a horse. If our understanding of castles cannot accommodate this reality, we need a looser working definition of these buildings lest we do an academic violence to this architectural tradition.

I would advocate the following: a castle is the residence of a lord made imposing through the architectural trappings of fortification.

The advantage of this definition is that it sidesteps the whole issue of defence without denying its importance. Added to this it can, crucially, accommodate the full diversity of castles within England. From the Tower of London in the eleventh century to Basingwerk in the seventeenth. This book is written in the belief that these buildings, though they achieve something in common: Basingwerk is not just a pastiche of the Tower but built as part of a continuous and integral tradition of English architecture. Moreover, this tradition was not written by the continuation existence of a social class: the patrons of these two castles shared, however remotely, what might be termed a knightly vocation. In one of the themes of this book will be the manner in which the physical form of the castle responded to the ideas current in each period while retaining an essential integrity.

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tectural forms embracing domestic, castle and ecclesiastic architecture. One outcome of this convergence of traditions, which was largely complete by the early fourteenth century, was that different types of building ceased to be necessarily distinguishable in terms of architectural detail alone: a church and a castle might share identical detailing, such as battlements, buttresses and complex window tracery. Instead, they contrasted with one another by the manner in which their common details were marshalled. Perhaps the only important architectural form specific to domestic buildings was the chimney, an outward sign of domestic comfort and wealth.

The contribution of castle architecture, with its connotations of chivalry and power, to the pool of common architectural details was hugely important. So admired were the architectural trappings of fortification that virtually all major buildings, including churches, in late medieval and early modern Britain in some way made play with them. Moreover, in domestic design the influence of castles is strongly apparent in the organisation and massing of elements, to such an extent, in fact, that almost all residential buildings of any pretension before the 1640s can be read as evocations of castles. The formidable stone walls of towers might dissolve into grids of glass and battlements into elaborate ornament, but the trappings of the castle lived on in grand domestic architecture until the advent of an accomplished and idiomatic classicism by designers such as Inigo Jones. On occasion they even survived beyond this. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed not so much the decline of the castle as its universal triumph made possible by the versatility and appeal of its forms.

Yet far the increasing difficulty of articulating the difference between a castle and other types of domestic architecture, the distinction between them does still apply. More than that, as the architectural distinctions blurred, the decision to call something a castle became much more pointed. And, fascinatingly, the enthusiasm for entitling great residences ‘castles’ did not wane, though the individuals who chose to do so belonged to an ever more exclusive social circle. Rather in the manner of Old Master paintings today, castles gradually priced themselves out of the market until they were the preserve of the very richest in the kingdom.

THE LICENSING OF FORTIFICATIONS

In 1066 William the Conqueror inherited a royal bureaucracy in England far more complex and sophisticated than the one he was familiar with in Normandy. Indeed, it may be only after the Conquest that he adopted a long-standing English habit of authenticating documents by attaching a wax seal impressed with an image to them. By the twelfth century the professional clerks of this royal bureaucracy had been organised into a department called chancery under the control of the chancellor, who held the principal or great seal of the realm. Throughout the Middle Ages and beyond the royal bureaucracy grew steadily as central government touched the lives of people in ever more varied and complex ways. The whole trend of this bureaucracy, as with all bureaucracies, was to ex-extend and specialise in response to the growing weight of work. From the accession of King John in 1199 its output also came to be systematically enrolled or calendared, copied on long rolls of parchment that would last the passage of time and be available for future reference.

The licensing of fortifications was a royal prerogative (though at different periods there were others in England who enjoyed quasi-regal powers over particular territories ... to occupy a castle. Some authorities have criticised this analysis, but in my opinion, setting aside some niceties, the point stands.

Apart from anything else, this conclusion is amply borne out on many levels by the evidence of the licences themselves, most obviously because the vast majority were issued with a seal appended and a legible text. Such, for example, is the case with the depiction

...proclaims the castle to be a fortification of value to the country at large. The idea, incidentally, is commonly voiced in the context of royal licences for town fortification.

One unique instance of a patent charter – though in this case not a royal one – being physically set in the context of a castle as an endorsement and explanation of its purpose is the charter issued to William de Turvey by Edward I in January 1277 granting custody of Rochester Castle to William de Corbeil, then archbishop of Canterbury, and to his successors in perpetuity. As part of the grant, the king also gave permission for the construction of a fortification (municionem) or tower (turre), as the archbishop pleased. The grant is universally agreed to refer to the construction of the surviving great tower at Rochester, one of the largest buildings of its kind ever erected in Europe (see pp. 15–18).

It has long been assumed that King John issued licences to crenellate  continued to be issued until the end of the sixteenth century, as at Mountgrevelle in Warwickshire in 1567. There is also one possible late runner issued in 1622 for Millom in Cumberland, authoritatively cited but untraceable today. Licences can variously refer to towns, monastic sites and private residences, and the number issued peaked in the fourteenth century. In total, approximately five hundred and fifty have been identified over this entire period for sites in England.

Over the last twenty years the subject of royal letters regarding fortifications has been radically reappraised. It has been compellingly argued, notably by Charles Coulson, that English kings did not attempt to condition castle construction through a system of licensing.

Instead, that they issued licences to crenellate in response to the demand of petitioners. These individuals, moreover, were primarily interested in getting licences because they gave royal sanction for new building projects that conveyed a message about their social position. In effect, such licences confirmed in an open, royal letter that you were a figure of the requisite social status to occupy a castle. Some authorities have criticised this analysis, but in my opinion, setting aside some niceties, the point stands.

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It is significant, too, that the internal evidence of the licences illustrates a concern with more than mere fortification. Many additionally confer permission to enclose land and create barrows (or fortifications) on the outer gate of the castle (pl. 4). This publicly proclaims the castle to be a fortification of value to the country at large. The idea, incidentally, is commonly voiced in the context of royal licences for town fortification.

That licences were of symbolic importance is further demonstrated in statistical terms. For example, there are far fewer licences than fortifications – a curious disjunction if all fortifications had to be licensed for the security of the realm. Moreover, the vast majority of licences issued to private individuals were granted to those of knightly or clerical status (around two hundred) rather than to the titled or high nobility. Throughout the early Middle Ages only three dukedoms and fifteen earldoms ever received a licence from the king to fortify residences as castles. This clearly does not accord with the number that must have been demanded by this group had the monarchy acutely wished to curb their power through such licensing.

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ings, though there are complications in using them for this purpose. The Oxburgh licence, for example, includes a pardon for work already undertaken, evidence that the licence was acquired as an afterthought. In other cases, it would appear that licences were issued as a blank cheque sanctioning the present and future construction of buildings. On 7 April 1474, for example, Lord Hastings, the chamberlain of England, received a licence from Edward iv simultaneously to fortify with walls and battlements four sites (or possibly five) within his estates and create hunting parks of 2,000 or 3,000 acres beside each of them. It is very hard to see what work actually followed upon this extraordinarily ambitious grant. Confusingly, there were already castles on two of the sites – Bagworth (Leicestershire) and Slegby (Yorkshire) – and there is no record of major alteration to either in this period. Meanwhile, his work to the other pair of mansors mentioned – Ashby de la Zouch from 1473–3 and Kirby Muxloe in 1465, both in Leicestershire – respectively anticipated and followed the licence.

No less problematic than the use of these documents to date architectural projects is the categorisation of the buildings associated with them. It might be supposed that residences actually licensed as fortifications in the Middle Ages might be judged as castles by a scholarly tradition primarily concerned with defence as a yardstick of architectural style. This is not in fact the case. A building such as Oxburgh, for example, despite its licence and an impressive array of battlements (see pl. 301), has not been deemed truly defensible by modern scholars. As a result it has not conventionally been entitled a castle.

It is the deliberate intention of the definition of a castle proposed in this book that such a judgement should be laid open to challenge. There is no record of what Oxburgh was actually called in the 1480s, but it makes no sense to divide this off from the tradition of castle building. The licence suggests that Sir Edward Bedingfeld saw fortifications as central to the character of his residence and his social identity. In a sense it is this understanding of the architectural trappings of fortification, not the quality of the defence they provided, that identify the castle.

THE SETTING OF CASTLES

Castles have never existed in isolation and to a limited degree this book must necessarily treat the features that were typical of their immediate landscape. Amongst the most architecturally prominent of these were the religious foundations – monasteries and colleges of secular priests – that grew up in the shadow of every great residence in the Middle Ages, whether a castle or not. These served two principal functions. In an age that acknowledged the direct intervention of God in human affairs, such foundations were spiritual resources, their prayers of direct benefit to the living and the dead. They were also instruments of political advertisement, indicating by their architecture and decoration the wealth and power of the family that patronised them.

These two functions were complementary in many ways, but especially with regard to the dead. Both before and after the Reformation, the churches associ-