

Berkeley Castle

Berkeley Castle rises on a low hill in sight of the Severn estuary. The castle is an appealing blend of Norman fortress and later medieval mansion, still remarkably unspoilt despite its continuous occupation by an aristocratic family, who might have been expected to rebuild or drastically modernize it in more recent centuries.

The motte and bailey layout may go back to William Fitz Osbern, but the oldest masonry here is the unusual keep. If it dates from Henry II's contract with Robert Fitz Harding, about 1155, then the three semi-circular projecting bastions are remarkably early, though the plinth and pilaster buttresses are consistent with that date.

One of the bastions contains a well chamber and another formed the apse of a chapel. The keep belongs to the shell keep type but its high wall actually encases the motte instead of rising from the summit. A feature taken from the tower keeps of the period, is the fore building. This is an afterthought, enclosing a narrow staircase that ascends to the keep entrance.

A deep breach in the keep wall, facing the outer bailey, is the only damage wrought by the Roundheads following a brief siege in 1645. The oblong Thorpe Tower beside it dates from the fourteenth century. The keep is infamous for the murder of Edward II by his jailers, Sir John Maltravers and Sir Thomas Gurney, in 1327. According to tradition, the deed was done in the chamber above the forebuilding. Edward had been sent to Berkely for safety following his abdication, but dethroned monarchs seldom remain alive for long.

The keep stood between two baileys. Only a restored gatehouse survives from the outer bailey but the inner is still intact. It is reached via a fourteenth century gateway flanked on one side by the keep and on the other side by a narrow, oblong tower.