

Corfe Castle

Corfe Castle, midway between Wareham and Swanage, is one of the most dramatic of English ruins. It stands on an isolated hill which forms part of the Purbeck range, towering over the picturesque village of the same name. The late Saxon kings had a palace here and it was outside the gates that Edward the Martyr was murdered in a family coup that put Ethelred the Unready on the throne.

The site allowed for two baileys of unequal size flanking a steep-sided summit, which forms a natural motte. The ring work known as The Rings, a quarter mile to the southwest is probably the siege fort of Matilda. Edward II was held captive here for a while between his abdication and murder. After that, the castle was seldom visited by its royal owners and fell into decay.

The marvel of Corfe Castle is the way in which the masonry has held together despite the most determined attempts to blow it up. Walls and towers have bowed outwards, even slid down the hillside, but a great deal stands nevertheless. The approach from the village is through a wide outer gate with rounded flanking towers. This is Edward I's only contribution to the castle.

It leads into the large outer bailey, its curtain flanked by seven half-round bastions which are closely spaced on the southwest where the terrain is most vulnerable. The bailey ascends to another round-towered gatehouse, still an impressive structure despite having split into two halves during the slighting. A stairway from the gatehouse leads upward in the thickness of a wing-wall to the keep on the summit. Otherwise, the route to the top involves passing through the West Bailey, which was walled by King John. Its wall converge to a western point, guarded by the octagonal Butavant Tower, which has been destroyed to its foundation.