

Launceston Castle

The keep of Launceston Castle dominates the town and surrounding countryside. Most Saxon burghs had castles forced upon them within a few years of the Norman Conquest, and the castle of "Dunhevet" is recorded in the Domesday Book. At that time it was held by William the Conqueror's half-brother Robert.

Initially the castle passed through a variety of hands, and the only Norman masonry is the shell keep on the motte. In 1227 Henry III granted the Earldom of Cornwall to his brother Richard, and he must have been responsible for most of the existing masonry. Eventually, the castle fell into the common rut of being used as a courthouse and gaol for the duchy, and the defenses decayed. By the end of the Civil War, during which it changed hands several times, it was a total ruin.

Earl Richard built a stone wall on top of the bailey rampart, but only the lower courses survive. It was a curiously plain curtain for the thirteenth century, without towers except for the drums flanking the southern gatehouse. The latter are still quite impressive and the simple gate tower at the far end of the bailey has also survived destruction. Otherwise it is the keep that commands our attention.

The only approach is via the stretch of curtain ascending the side of the motte, controlled at its foot by a ruinous tower. Launceston's unique "triple crown" keep is the result of three phases - a stone reverment around the upper part of the motte, the late Norman shell keep on top and Richard of Cornwall's cylindrical tower rising up within it. This arrangement appears to constitute an early example of concentric planning, though it is clear from the joint holes in the walls that the narrow space between the tower and the shell were roofed over.