

Leeds Castle

Leeds Castle rises serenely from the waters of its urrounding lake. The lake is an artificial one created by damming the River Len. The castle existed in 1139 because, in that year, King Stephen wrested it from Matilda's supporters.

The two islands on which suggest a motte and bailey origin, and the lake itself existed by 1272. In terms of masonry, however, the castle is essentially the work of Edward I, with additions by Henry VIII and much nineteenth century beautification. Around the entrance, the lake decreases to a narrow moat.

On the near side of the moat are the ruins of a peculiar barbican, which had three gateways because three roads converged here. The gatehouse is a squat tower, Edwardian in date but not at all in spirit. It has a recess for the drawbridge and a later row of machicolations above the entrance.

Except for one of the four D-shaped flanking bastions, the curtain was reduced to a low retaining wall in the nineteenth century, to allow an unimpeded view across the lake. Foundations of an earlier curtain enclosing a slightly narrower area have come to light, so Leeds may have been a concentric castle, though there is no proof that the two walls stood simultaneously. There are two separate residential blocks within the bailey: Maiden's Tower, one of Henry VIII's additions, and the neo-Gothic mansion built by Fiennes Wykeham-Martin in the 1820s. It occupies the site of lavish medieval apartments.

From the back of the mansion, a stone corridor, replacing a wooden causeway and drawbridge, leads to the keep on the smaller island. It is known as the Gloriette. This peculiar, D-shaped structure is built around a tiny courtyard in shell keep manner. Its lower part, including the tall plinth, which rises straight out of the water, is Edward I's work.