

Norwich Castle

Norwich and York were the biggest towns of medieval England after London, and Norwich was saddled with a royal castle within a year of the Norman Conquest. The site, at the heart of the old city, is a natural hillock that was scraped into a formidable motte -though a motte large enough to be regarded as an inner bailey. A car park occupies the site of the outer bailey.

The strength of this earth and timber fortification is attested in 1075 during the rebellion of some disaffected barons. On the failure of this revolt, the Earl of Norfolk fled abroad, leaving his wife to hold the castle against William I's supporters, which she commendably did for a siege lasting three months.

On top of the motte there now stands a large square keep, unique for the rows of blank arcading that adorn the outer walls in between the pilaster buttresses. If the masonry looks too fresh, it is because the exterior was entirely refaced under Anthony Salvin in the 1830s, but it is clear from old drawings that the new work is a FAITHFUL COPY OF THE Caen stone original.

No other Norman keep is so decorative, not even Falaise in Normandy, which might be called Norwich's twin. Falaise was built by Henry I and it is likely that Norwich was also. The probable date is 1119-1132, when there was a pause in building the cathedral, thus releasing masons with the necessary skills. Some authorities would put the keep later on architectural grounds, but there is no recorded expenditure under Henry II.

The keep became derelict in the eighteenth century and the old cross wall has been replaced by a Victorian arcade inserted when the keep was re-roofed to form part of the Castle Museum. It is now difficult to visualize the original layout.