Medieval Realms Resource Pack: Norwich Castle

Norwich Castle and its Early History

* The new Norman king William I imposed his power on an English population by building castles, all of which were first made of wood, including the one in Norwich after the Conqueror made a military expedition into East Anglia in 1067. The simplest of the early Norman castles were called ringworks, which were roughly circular enclosures surrounded by a bank and ditch and containing wooden buildings to house the garrison and its supplies. More common, such as the one at Norwich, was the motte and bailey.
* Wood was used so that they could build with speed, but also to allow the earth in the mottes time to settle, before the building in stone began. This is demonstrated at Norwich, where the motte had to be extended to take the massive stone keep built as a royal palace. The extension was not given enough time to settle and this weakness had an effect upon the building, evidence of which can be seen it its fabric.
* The first stones castles to be seen in Norfolk were built by the Norman invaders and they express very forcibly the power of the new ruling classes. The stone keep of Norwich Castle was begun perhaps as early as 1094 under William Rufus, who succeeded William the Conqueror. It had certainly been finished and furnished by 1122 when Henry I spent Christmas there. As well as a way of strengthening Norman power in Norwich, the Keep was built as a royal palace, which explains the grand decoration of the building both outside and in and why it isn’t as grim and stark as may other castles of the period.
* It is situated strategically at the end of a natural escapement, which lies to the south along the river valley. At the foot of this ran the major route to the Saxon town of Norwich from the south. The fact that such an elaborate castle was built in Norwich was a sign of the city’s rapidly increasing economic and strategic importance. Few cities in England could rival Norwich as a boom town in the late eleventh century.
* Norwich Castle was the third royal fortified palace to be built on England after the Norman Conquest, the earlier two being the Tower of London and Colchester Castle. It was used as a fortress and as a palace where the King could stay when he visited the city, although the man in charge of the day-to-day running of the castle was called the Constable. He was appointed by the King.
* The Keep is one of the largest Norman keeps in England with a height of about 21.5m and the wall which are about three metres thick at the base, although they do gradually taper as they get higher. They were designed to withstand attack. The original doorway to the keep is on the first floor on the eastern side, protected by a forebuilding called Bigod Tower (Hugh Bigod was a twelfth century constable of the castle) and , which you cannot gain access to this side because of the later building, you will be able to see the magnificent doorway when you enter the castle.

Outside the Keep

* If the Keep doesn’t look as weatherworn as one would expect of a Norman castle, it is because these are not the original stones. The outside of the Keep was refaced in the 19th Century with Bath stone. However, with one exception, this is how the Norman Keep would have looked. Evidence of the building before the re-facing is found in drawings by the architect, Francis Stone, made in 1819-20. The only difference in the refaced Keep is that the whole exterior is now faced in stone, whereas the original building was flint up to the first floor on the exterior – the floor divide being marked by the first string course.
* Norman stonework survives pretty well intact all around the interior of the Keep which you will see when you go inside. The original was fine limestone imported from Caen in Normandy, This would have required many hundreds of boatloads to complete the task. Even though beautifully faced with cut limestone, inside and out, the core of the walls, and therefore the bulk of the structure, was made from local flint rubble mixed with mortar.
* Also on the south wall (adjacent to the Museum entrance) is the drain, supported by a worn, though still impressively large lion corbel, which is one of the few surviving original features on the outside of the building. Inside is a sink, built into the wall at waist height. The sink is built to the right of the fireplace in the great chamber, and there is also evidence of this fireplace on the exterior wall. The central buttress was used as a chimney and either side of it, just above the first string course, you can see two rectangular openings and, between these and just above, on the buttress itself, a third opening. These are not window slits, which would have had the rounded Norman arches at the top, but chimney vents to allow smoke to escape from the side of the keep.
* The west side of the keep would have faced the new marketplace of the city and what was called the French borough, founded shortly after the Conquest for the newcomers. Latrines were built into this wall at main floor level and human waste would have fallen from the four vertical slits or chutes.
* At the far end of the west wall can be seen some further rectangular openings, which are, once again, smoke outlets – this time of the kitchen that was located on the first floor at the north-west corner of the keep.

Inside the Keep

* The transition from the outside world to the interior of the keep was marked by a doorway at the top of the main stairway inside the forebuilding – Bigod Tower. This is now accessed via steps behind the Admissions desk and then right before the glass doors, which takes you up to the Bigod Tower where visitors waited before being admitted into the keep. The doorway here was the only entrance ot the castle in Norman times.
* This doorway is one of the least damaged and impressive parts of the original building. The fact it is so grand is a reminder that Norwich Castle was also the king’s royal palace in Norfolk.
* The great overarch is 5 metres across. Beneath that is the entrance itself and, alongside it, a narrower blind arch. This pairing of larger and smaller arches is reminiscent of city gates – one arch of the main road and the other for pedestrians. This arrangement was widespread in Ancient times and a deliberate echo of the ancient work is intended here. The smaller arch serves no other purpose than to remind us of this.
* There are also some interesting carvings in the archway over the entrance. One shows the peculiar image of a man on his knees, holding a shield and a sword. Another, near the apex of the arch, is of a winged horse – presumably the Pegasus of the Greek myth. In the Bayeux Tapestry a pair of winged horses appears on one occasion only, and that is over the head of Duke William as he and his troops ride into battle at Hastings.
* The capitals to the left of the doorway show stag hunting and boar hunting – one of the pastimes of the medieval knight.
* This doorway would have led straight into the Great Hall. However, the inside of the keep looks very different to what it would have done in Norman times. There used to be a floor across the whole castle at this level, but all the main internal dividing walls have been removed at one time or another and we are left with the upper wooden gallery which, although at the same height as the main 12th century floor level only runs around the outer edge of the building. In other words, we are left with a shell which has been refurbished in a way which bears little resemblance to the original. The lower wooden floor, for example, was inserted in the late 19th century and is at a height which bears no relation to any feature of the medieval building. Also, in place of the solid spine wall which originally divided the interior into two compartments, there is now a great open arcade which misleadingly opens up the inside of the keep.
* The keep was two storeys, the living quarters being on the first floor – the level of the present wooden gallery – while the basement was used for stores.
* The central section of the southern compartment on the main floor was given over to a large room – the Great Chamber – which could be entered from the hall and would have been the constable’s quarters. There is a large fireplace in the centre, positioned in the south wall, flanked to either side by a substantial window at wall passage level. To the right of the fireplace in the south-west corner of the Chamber are the remains of a sink built into the wall at waist height. On the exterior of the building, the drain is supported by a lion corbel – one of the few surviving original surviving features. The sink was probably used for the washing of hands, rather than the preparation of food. The existence of the sink must be seen in conjunction with the well, situated in the opposite corner of the room, where it was probably enclosed within a room of its own.
* This must have been inconvenient for some purposes, such as cooking, but the decision to incorporate a kitchen in the building (in the north-west corner) was taken long after work was begun, and presumably the well was already largely constructed by then. We know that the kitchen’s location was an after-thought because the spiral staircase which had been begun in the north-west corner was not completed. Instead it was floored over to accommodate a kitchen fireplace and the smoke outlets for this can be seen as can the uncompleted staircase.
* A chapel was built in the south-east corner for the King to pray in.
* The latrines were placed in the thickness of the western wall. There were four compartments, each containing four units. They would empty through chutes leading to the outside of the keep on the western side.
* The principal function of the ground floor was storage – of food, drink, fuel and perhaps some additional defensive material and military hardware. The lowly status of this floor is indicated by the cheaper and rougher fabric of its flint rubble walls.