

History Group Visit to Kenilworth Castle.

The visit to Kenilworth Castle took place during a spell of exceptionally good weather and this meant that this historic venue was seen at its absolute best.

The Norman castle was built in the 1120s, and was surrounded by a mere or artificial lake. Over many centuries its owners have extended and improved the property, so that the buildings now on view present a mixture of styles and purposes. There is still much of the Castle left to explore and recently there has been much renovation and improvement.



Two views of Kenilworth Castle.

The Castle is most famous for being the venue where **Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester**, hosted his Queen, in a last attempt to woo **Elizabeth I** and gain her hand in marriage. During her long stay of 1575 Leicester had firework displays, masques, banquets and other amusements and diversions laid on to impress his Royal guest.

One of the ways Leicester tried to impress the Queen was by laying out what is now known as **the Elizabethan Garden**. This was a formal garden, with lush floral displays and symbolic plants, but it was also a pleasure garden, containing an aviary, obelisks, a fountain, arbours and terraces. The 1575 garden, used for entertainment but also designed to impress, has recently been restored to its original plan.



The Elizabethan Garden.

Nearby is **Leicester's Gatehouse**, built in 1571 - 2, with an exceptionally fine frontispiece, containing symbolic detailing. The building itself contains well preserved Elizabethan panelling and a fine alabaster fireplace, as well as housing an exhibition on the theme of Leicester and Elizabeth.



Leicester's Gatehouse.

Among the many other buildings which can be explored are Leicester's Building, the Great Tower, the Kitchens, the Great Hall, the Strong Tower and the State Apartments. **The Stables** erected in 1553 by Leicester's father, John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland now houses the café.



The Stables with ruins of Collegiate Chapel in foreground.

The impressive **Tiltyard**, which is the first part of the castle that the visitor enters was built on top of the dam that was formed by the causeway across a valley, at the confluence of the Finham and Inchford Brooks. The dam was widened to allow jousting at tournaments. **Mortimer's Tower** stands at the end of the Tiltyard and was the main medieval entrance to the Castle.

The two main floors of **the Great Tower, or Keep** were built in the 1120s and King John added top stage between 1210 and 1215. The three lofty Elizabethan grid windows, on the first floor, were added by Dudley in 1570 - 1571 to light the great hall for entertaining. It is a monumental building with some walls 14' (4.3m) thick.



The Keep, Kitchen and Great Hall.



The Keep or Great Tower.

The Kitchens adjacent to the Great Tower had the capacity to cater for several hundred people if necessary. The footprint of the kitchens still shows some unique and original features, such as the hearths of three enormous fireplaces and a cobbled floor with a drain.

The Great Hall built by John of Gaunt is an architectural masterpiece. It was erected to emphasise the owner's royal status and the windows are particularly noteworthy for their exceptional height and delicacy. This early Perpendicular style tracery is an outstanding example of domestic architecture of this period.



The Great Hall

John of Gaunt was also the builder of the **State Apartments**.

The Strong Tower has recently been improved so that visitors can climb up to second floor height via wooden staircases and wooden walkways. There are spectacular panoramic views out over the castle to the Mere from this building, which originally contained the buttery, larders and pantry, as well as accommodation for senior household officials.

Leicester's Building was built by the Queen's 'favourite' specifically to provide private lodgings for her and her closest servants. She used it in 1572 and then it was improved by Leicester for her visit of 1575. It is a particularly impressive structure, which has a substantial modern stainless steel staircase, hidden from outside view, to enable visitors to access all the floors from the inside.



Leicester's Building

Among the illustrious owners of the Castle were Simon de Montfort; The Crown from 1174 - 1244; the first two Earls of Lancaster and John of Gaunt. Many famous visitors have been to the Castle including Henry V, Sir Walter Scott (who was inspired to write his novel 'Kenilworth' after his visit), Queen Victoria, Charles Dickens and Henry James.

This fascinating venue proved to have much to delight and educate the visitor. As a historical site it has played a rich part in the story of our nation and is well worth a repeat visit.

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