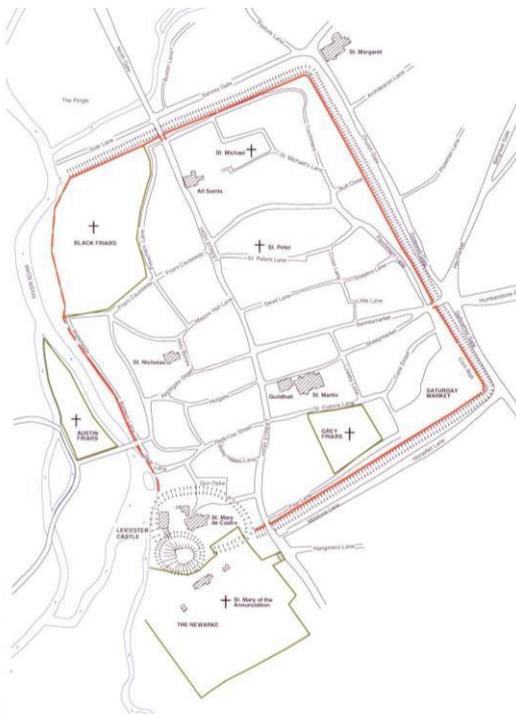


Leicester Castle

The Castle Hall is comprised of the former Great Hall of Leicester Castle, which was converted to a County Court in the 19th century. It is a Grade I Listed Building, and is located within the Castle Conservation Area. Adjacent to the Hall is John of Gaunt's cellar.



In 1068, soon after the Norman Conquest, a castle was built in Leicester. It was placed at the south-west corner of the town's Roman defences where it could dominate the town and control the river crossing.



Above: Plan of Mediaeval Leicester showing the position of the Castle

The castle was a mound of earth (a motte) with a large enclosure below it. The enclosure, or bailey, was surrounded by a water-filled ditch about 10 metres wide and 5 metres deep.

It then had an earthen rampart which was topped with a wooden stockade. The bailey was probably entered via a timber gatehouse on the north side and the ditch is likely to have been spanned by a timber bridge.

In addition to the castle buildings, the area enclosed by the bailey would have had a large number of timber buildings and the Church of St. Mary de Castro. Below is the inner Castle precinct and how it may have looked after 1150



The mound you can see today is about 10 metres high but would have been much higher; about 5 metres of it was removed in 1840 to make the top large enough for a bowling green.

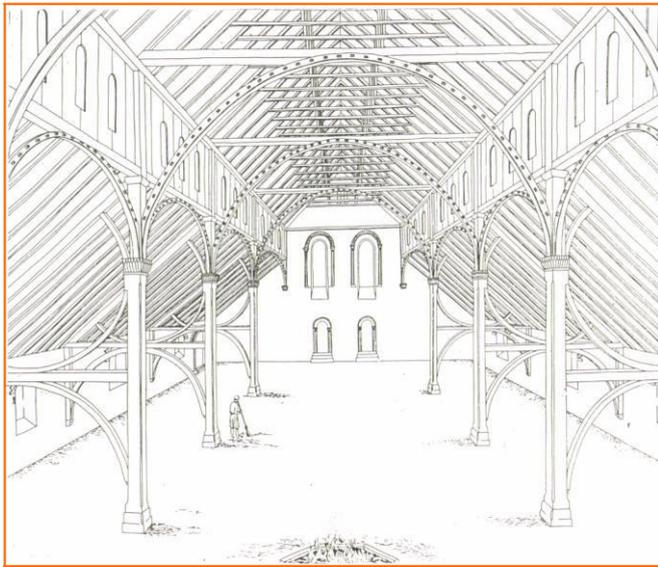
In the 1100s the timber elements of the castle began to be replaced with stone. The stone Great Hall was built by 1150 probably by Robert le Bossu (Robert the Hunchback) who became Earl of Leicester in 1118. Robert le Bossu was very powerful and his control of royal forests was the key to the building of the Great Hall.

Oak trees were needed that were grown sufficiently close together to force them to grow taller towards the light. In this way they could provide timbers of sufficient height and thickness for the wooden aisle posts and arcades. The Great Hall was built reflecting the standards and values of the highest levels of society and Leicester Castle became a showpiece and centre of magnificence for the house of Lancaster.

The Great Hall is almost certainly the oldest surviving aisled and bay-divided timber hall in Britain. It would have looked very different from how it does today, but it still retains some of its timber arcade posts.

Inside the Great Hall

The walls of the Great Hall were built from local sandstone. The interior was divided into a central nave about 7.31metres wide (24ft) with two aisles, like a church, about 3.66m (12ft) wide. Each aisle would then have been divided into timber arcades with substantial oak columns. Each of these oak columns rested on a moulded stone base and had a scalloped 'capital' at the top.

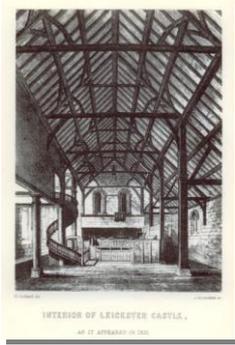


Structure of the Great Hall showing clerestory, 1150



Great Hall showing new roof structure after 1523

Many of the original aisle posts supporting the roof have been removed or shaved, but the capital of one of these survives. The original roof was covered with oak shingles and had a centrally placed louver to carry away smoke from the hearth below.



Traces of the original window positions can still be seen in the exterior stonework of the west wall and two original round-headed windows with chevron decoration survive in the south wall of the hall. The large window in the north wall of the nave is a replacement of 1821, but no doubt replaces an original window of similar size. The main entrance to the hall was probably in the eastern wall of the southernmost bay, and was presumably round-headed and highly decorated. Two doorways in the south wall of the nave 'and remains of others', observed in the 1920s probably led to a detached building or buildings which housed the buttery, pantry and kitchen.

Like all medieval halls, the Leicester Great Hall had a high, more elaborately decorated (north) end with a large window and a raised dais or lord's table. The Hall was communal living and sleeping space for most of the castle residents. From behind the dais, stairs led to a great chamber, the lord's private space for his family and guests.

Castle Life

The Castle was the administrative headquarters for the Earl of Leicester's great collection of lands known as the Honor of Leicester. On three occasions (1349, 1414, 1425/6) Parliament met in the Great Hall. The lord's court was held every three weeks and many criminals were sentenced there to hang on the earl's gallows. Human remains found within the castle mound are probably from the lord's judicial executions.

For most of the time few people actually lived in the castle, as the lords of Leicester held many castles and manors around the kingdom. When lords like John of Gaunt visited they were accompanied by numerous followers - knights, squires, officials, servants and guests - and it cost a great deal of money. In 1313 £8000 was spent on household expenses, an enormous sum for the day. On these occasions the castle became a hive of activity. Edward I stayed at the castle in 1300, and Edward II in 1310 and 1311. Visits were marked by giving of gifts, lavish pageantry and entertainment. In 1390 the king, queen and greatest lords in the land were at Leicester Castle for a hunting party with the height of luxury and display.

There was a separate chapel for the private use of the lord and his household in the castle and next door to the chapel was the dancing-chamber, first mentioned in 1377. There were castle minstrels to which the Mayor of Leicester contributed payments, and song and dance was very much a part of castle life.

Also there was the castle's own prison house, distinct from the town and county gaols, and the usual stables and miscellaneous out buildings. Adjacent to the Great Hall is a vaulted cellar known as John of Gaunt's cellar. It is probably the remains of a stone kitchen or chamber block with an undercroft or cellar at the 'low' south end of the Great Hall. The alignment of the undercroft, shows it was built along the line of the bailey defences meaning it could be as old as the Great Hall.



John of Gaunt's cellar in the early 1900s

The kitchen block would have included a fireplace, spits and equipment for cooking and tables for preparing meat. There was a buttery for receiving and storing wine, a pantry with bins for storing bread, also a bakehouse, scullery and larder, ewery (where ewers and pitchers for washing hands at mealtimes were kept), the saucery (condiments), spicery and chandlery (candles). Barrel rust marks found in the cellar are associated with its use for wine, beer or other storage.

Around 1400 John of Gaunt's cellar was reconstructed with the addition of the vault (the present roof), an extension at the north end, and a reconstruction of the southern façade. Elaborate, deeply cut graffiti carved in 1798 show use of the cellar as a prison during the Napoleonic wars.



John of Gaunt's cellar, 1859



John of Gaunt's cellar, 2012

When the Dukes of Lancaster became Kings of England with Henry IV (1399), the centre of importance moved from Leicester to Westminster where it has remained. Leicester Castle continued to be an estate office for the Duchy of Lancaster's Leicestershire estates and a place for holding the Courts of Assize. One of the last and most remarkable records of royal occupation at the Castle is a letter dated 18 August 1483 by Richard III *"from my castle of Leicester"*.

Tree ring dating of the Great Hall timbers shows that, apart from the aisle posts, the entire roof was remade in the early 1500s. In 1523, a survey of the castle recommended that one hundred oak trees be supplied from Enderby Wood for repair work. Only the nave section of this new roof survives. Surveys from the end of the 1400s onwards report decay with little evidence of attempts to repair. With decay came destruction of most of the buildings and eventually only the Great Hall remained complete, its eastern wall stylishly rebuilt about 1695 to hide the antiquity of the structure behind.

The Great Hall was the scene of special functions such as the ball held in 1722; and a grand concert for the anniversary of the infirmary in 1774.

Courts in the Great Hall

Assizes continued to be held at the Castle, and this judicial need ensured the Hall's survival. Courts of assize were periodic criminal courts held until 1972, when together with the Quarter Sessions, they were abolished and replaced by a single permanent Crown Court. Assizes heard the most serious cases, which were sent on from the Quarter Sessions (held four times a year).

In 1821 the Great Hall was divided up into two separate court rooms with further alterations and the addition of a cell block in 1858. The courts were laid out as a civil court on one side and a criminal court on the other (divided by a lobby) with a passage leading from the dock down to the holding cells below. A Grand Jury Room (later on used as a juvenile court) was created on an upper floor.

Barristers' rooms were added and a judge's retiring room provided for each court behind the bench. Public viewing areas were reserved at the back of each court and galleries used as private viewing areas were also set up. Court furniture was installed with specific places for jury, witnesses and lawyers. A later modern feature included pegs for the jury to hang their hats on. The judges sat under a wooden canopy with the royal arms displayed which, like the lord's dais in the medieval hall, was intended to ensure proper respect was shown.

In 1888 the county justices purchased the castle from the crown and its royal connections formally came to an end. Sittings of the Crown Court were held in the castle until 1992.

The criminal court was the scene of Leicester's notorious "green bicycle murder" trial in 1919. A young woman named Bella Wright was shot at Little Stretton, Leicester, on 5 July. Earlier that evening she had been seen with a man on a green bicycle.

Ronald Light, aged 34, was tried for her murder and on the advice of his barrister, Sir Edward Marshall-Hall, admitted everything but the killing. Marshall-Hall made the case that the fatal shot could have been an accidental shot from a distance. He argued that this was likely, because a shot at close range would have done more damage to the victim's face. This theory and Light's demeanour were apparently enough to acquit him.

The Green Bicycle Murder (1993) by C. Wendy East concludes that Light was guilty as charged. Other writers have put forth different views, including the possibility that Light killed Wright accidentally.

The River and Castle Gardens

A medieval mill, originally a grain mill, is recorded close to the Castle; it was a spinning mill by 1871 and functioned until 1876, but drainage improvement meant that the water supply was removed. Eventually, in the 1920s, the area was cleared and proposals developed. The present **Castle Gardens** were laid out as a public open space and park, opened in 1926. In them a few fragments of the bailey from the 1400s can be seen and there is a pleasant route through to the Castle mound.

Literary Connections

As well as the Castle's many royal connections, it has two notable literary links. Geoffrey Chaucer, author of the *Canterbury Tales*, was part of John of Gaunt's circle in Leicester. He married Philippa de Roet, lady-in-waiting to Edward III's queen, at St Mary de Castro. Chaucer also wrote 'The Book of the Duchess' which was an elegy for John of Gaunt's first wife, Blanche of Lancaster.

James M. Barrie (1860-1937), Scottish author and dramatist, best known for his character Peter Pan also has a connection with the Castle. Between 1883-1884 he worked as a staff reporter with the *Nottingham Journal*, he was paid 3 guineas a week writing leaders and columns. As part of his work he spent many hours in the courts at Leicester Castle. A colleague described him as "*a craftsman to his fingertips*". He moved to London 1885. His play *Peter Pan or, The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up* was first performed in 1904 and published in 1928.

Further reading

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Levi Fox, *Leicester Castle* (1944 reprint of article in TLHAS Vol.22)

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Thompson, J., 1856, *Leicester Castle*



The rear of the Castle looking from Castle Gardens, July 2012

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