



Robin Hood — outside Nottingham Castle walls  
Photo: James Wright

# Nottingham Castle

Visitors to the Russell Foundation sometimes like to see Nottingham Castle. For several years, it has been impossible to take them inside, as a major clean-up, repair and refurbishment took place. Instead, we would walk a strenuous circuit around the Castle walls, perhaps stopping for refreshment at The Trip to Jerusalem pub. A thousand years ago, the Castle Rock was fortified because of its elevated location in the Trent Valley, which marked a natural boundary in the land.

With an archeologist's eye, James Wright recounts the Castle's history and significance, adding that 'Nottingham Castle offers a phenomenally important social history which reflects almost 400 years of turbulent class struggles'. In the 1660s, William Cavendish had returned to Nottingham from long years of Continental exile, some spent in what had been Reubens' fine house in Antwerp. Nottingham Castle's Ducal Palace surely owes much to this Continental influence. Cavendish fled to the Continent after losing on the battlefield in the royalist cause of Charles I, who later lost his head. Towards the end of his life, Cavendish embarked on this last construction, which expresses wider connections.

Regrettably, current entrance prices to the Castle put off many who would like to visit or drop in, as we regularly used to do when entrance was free, not so many years ago. The Castle has much to offer, for all ages. Ticket prices can be changed, or abolished, as they were for some London museums. Meanwhile, Nottingham Castle continues to reveal its secrets, as Robin Hood takes aim outside the walls.

*Tony Simpson*



Nottingham Castle Gatehouse  
Photo: James Wright

## A Place Full Royal

*James Wright*

*James Wright is an award-winning buildings archaeologist who runs Triskele Heritage. He first worked at Nottingham Castle as a conservation stonemason in the early 2000s and later went on to run the Castles of Nottinghamshire project. Latterly, James acted as historic stone specialist and buildings archaeology consultant at Nottingham Castle for Trent & Peak Archaeology. He has two decades' professional experience of ferreting around in people's cellars, hunting through their attics, and digging up their gardens. He hopes to find meaningful truths about how ordinary and extraordinary folk lived their lives in the mediaeval period.*

Nottingham Castle stands on the summit of a rock outcrop to the west of the city centre, which is famously riddled with artificial caves and tunnels. It was fortified, with earth and timber, for William the Conqueror during the winter of 1067/8, and was then kept by his henchmen, the Peveril family. They struggled to hold the Castle for King Stephen during the 'Anarchy,' and the site changed hands several times in the mid-twelfth century until it was eventually taken into direct royal control by Henry II. He spent a lot of time upgrading the site and rebuilding in stone. By this point the Castle consisted of a royal citadel (Upper Bailey) on the edge of the rock, a large enclosure to the north containing the chapel, kitchens and great hall (Middle Bailey), a third area to the east (Outer Bailey) lay close to the Norman Borough, and a fourth enclosure stood further to the north. Meanwhile, a brewhouse and mills lay on the banks of the River Leen, to the south, and a deer park lay to the west.

Subsequently, the castle had a rich, vibrant and exciting history. Richard I successfully besieged supporters of his brother, John, in March 1194, and hanged a number of them for resisting. To continue this theme, after inheriting the throne, John also hanged 28 Welsh hostages from the walls in 1212. His son, Henry III, ordered major re-organisation of the Castle – he was responsible for the surviving Outer Bailey walls, towers, gatehouse and bridge. Edward I also lavished large sums on the Castle and his son, Edward II, spent many long visits at what was now a palatial fortress.

One of the most famous episodes in the

Castle's history took place in October 1330, when the young Edward III crept through a tunnel stretching between the deer park and the Middle Bailey. He did so to surprise and capture Roger Mortimer, the presumed lover of his mother, who had deposed his father. Later in his reign, Edward had the captured Scottish King David II imprisoned at Nottingham Castle after the battle of Neville's Cross.

The royal visits and lavish spending continued throughout the fourteenth century, until the Castle was taken over by the Lancastrians in 1399. Henry IV witnessed a duel between two Frenchmen in 1407. However, for much of the fifteenth century the castle was under the control of appointed constables such as Ralph Lord Cromwell. That is until the Yorkist Edward IV took a personal interest in the site and instigated the last major mediaeval building project – Richard's Tower with its elegant suite of apartments in the Middle Bailey – at a cost of £3,000, between 1476-80. The poet John Skelton described the Castle at this time as 'a place full royal'. In 1485, Edward's brother, Richard III, gathered his forces at Nottingham prior to marching out to his doom at Bosworth.

### **Decay and Ruin**

The Tudors had relatively little interest in Nottingham. They seldom travelled so far north and were more interested in their fashionable brick courtyard houses in the south-east of England. When the castle was surveyed in 1525, it was found to be in 'decay and ruin'. Although some repairs were ordered, the rot continued throughout Elizabeth's reign, and the site was leased to the Earl of Rutland in 1622 and the Earl of Newcastle in 1641.

On 22 August 1642, Charles I opened hostilities on Parliament and chose the old enclosure to the north of the Castle to raise the Royal Standard and launch the British Civil Wars. However, by the autumn, the Castle had been garrisoned by Parliament – eventually coming under the governorship of Colonel John Hutchinson. Despite the dilapidated state of the site, Hutchinson set about making it defensible and successfully held it against royalist raiding throughout the war. In 1651, the new commander, Major Poulton, lobbied the Council of State to slight the castle, which led to near-wholesale demolition between July and November of that year.

### **A Stately Mansion**

After the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the Castle was purchased by William Cavendish, now Duke of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He hired stonemason Samuel Marsh and embarked on a project, between 1674-9, to

transform the site into an Italianate Ducal Palace, later described by the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner as ‘a stately mansion’.

Although later owners had largely abandoned the house by the nineteenth century, opposition to the extension of voting rights in the Reform Act of 1831 by the 4th Duke of Newcastle-under-Lyme sparked a riot in Nottingham, which left the Castle a burned-out shell. The site was then used as a military parade ground until it was purchased by the local authority. Architect Thomas Hine was contracted to remodel the mansion, between 1875-8, as the first art gallery outside of London in public ownership. The Castle remains in the possession of Nottingham City Council, who have recently appointed a trust to oversee, manage and run the site. Comprehensive renovation began in 2018 and the site reopened to the public in June 2021.

### **A proper castle?**

Given the remarkable history of Nottingham Castle, there is a real sense of loss – almost a trauma – that comes out as a visceral sense of injury, resentment and deficiency in some people’s reactions to the site. For locals and visitors alike, the site isn’t a ‘*proper*’ castle. It doesn’t fit the popular image of a great mediaeval castle: towers, crenellations, dungeons, spiral stairs, portcullis, drawbridge or moat (although there is still surviving physical evidence for most of these). When compared to Warwick, Bamburgh or Caernarfon, the perception is that Nottingham doesn’t compete. From the exterior of the mediaeval Outer Bailey gatehouse the view looks promising but, on entering, the sense of disappointment weighs heavily for many visitors when confronted with a mansion house sitting in municipal gardens. Criticism of this building started early. Writing in the 1790s, the antiquarian John Throsby noted that:

‘as an object of admiration to the surrounding country, in union with the rock on which it stands, it falls very short of our wishes and expectation.’

Yet Nottingham is not particularly rare in being a town or city lacking substantial remains of its mediaeval castle. Fifteen miles to the west is the city’s great rival – Derby – which had a motte and bailey castle that barely survived the Norman period. Similar stories played out in the county towns of Bedford, Buckingham, Ipswich and Stafford. The fenland castles at Peterborough, Ely and Cambridge are now traced only by grassy mounds. Worcester, Leicester and Canterbury lasted longer, but only vestiges now remain. Elsewhere, Bolsover was taken down and rebuilt as a Renaissance pastiche of a castle in the early seventeenth century.

Many mediaeval castles suffered substantially during the British Civil Wars and only scant remains are left at sites including Bristol, Pontefract and Belvoir in Leicestershire. The latter was substantially remodelled in the sixteenth century, heavily damaged in the Civil Wars, and comprehensively rebuilt as a Neo-Gothick mansion in the nineteenth century. Gloucester's castle was lost beneath a prison. Northampton was swallowed beneath a rail station.

Losing a castle is not a rarity. So why do folk get so salty about the lack of mediaeval buildings at Nottingham?

### **Outlaws of Sherwood**

Distinct from all the above, Nottingham Castle is one of the most renowned historic locations in the British Isles through its association with 'Bad King John', the wicked Sheriff of Nottingham, and the heroic Robin Hood. The Castle receives approximately 200,000 visitors every year – many of them hungry to explore the setting for the celebrated folklore of the greenwood outlaw. It is an intrinsic part of the world-famous legends of Sherwood Forest and, in the minds of many, the site doesn't offer the expected levels of majestic romance portrayed on stage and screen.

Unlike the espousal of King Arthur's mythic birthplace at Tintagel Castle (Cornwall) by English Heritage, there has been a historic resistance by Nottingham's authorities towards effectively embracing the legendary associations of the Castle. This is certainly changing, but throughout my lifetime Robin Hood has been kept strictly outside the walls. Literally. His iconic statue is placed in what was once the Castle boundary ditch. For over twenty years the principle city centre attraction linked to the outlaw – The Tales of Robin Hood – was a private enterprise which closed down over a decade ago. Inside the Castle, the outlaw was largely absent from displays and interpretation. Materiality eclipsed intangible heritage. Was the Hooded Man just too flighty to be taken seriously in a formal museum setting?

If visitors flock to Nottingham expecting a sprawling mediaeval castle worthy of John, Robin and the Sherriff, they are understandably disappointed. However, would they feel the same if confronted with picturesque ruins? There was once the potential for this. Daniel King's view of Nottingham Castle, drawn after the slighting of the castle in 1660, showed upstanding mediaeval buildings. It is apparent that these were cleared away prior to the construction of the Ducal Palace.

### **An Unwanted Palace?**

Is there perhaps a sense of feeling cheated – particularly for the locals of Nottingham? A sense that if it weren't for the construction of the mansion then there might have been something akin to Kenilworth Castle (which was also garrisoned and slighted during the Civil Wars) standing on Castle Rock? Try and visualise just how magnificent that would have looked. Imagine how impressed tourists would be. Contemplate the bursting pride that local people would feel. Ponder just how many hundreds of thousands more visitors would flock from all over the globe. Consider just how much more revenue would be generated ...

For many people, the very act of building the Ducal Palace on the site of what had undoubtedly been one of the most spectacular castles of the mediaeval era adds an unbearably painful insult to an already excruciating injury. Yet compare this with the extensive destruction of Pontefract Castle in 1649 – there is nowhere near the level of instinctive anguish over its loss – despite that it was a demonstrably comparable site to Nottingham.

Aside from the lack of a legendary hero associated with the castle, Pontefract was not landscaped and rebuilt in an altogether new style. There was no perceived insult to the memory of the mediaeval castle where Richard II starved to death in the winter of 1400. There may be limited sorrow by local interest groups for the loss of castles such as Pontefract or other royal palaces such as Woodstock (Oxfordshire), Langley (Hertfordshire) and Clarendon (Wiltshire), or occasional tutting about the destruction of monasteries during Henry VIII's Reformation, but there just aren't the same levels of collective outrage as expressed at Nottingham.

Calls for the Ducal Palace to be itself demolished and replaced with a replica of the mediaeval castle occur online weekly if not daily. During the last decade there was even one ardent chap who used to regularly write letters in the *Nottingham Post* demanding this on behalf of the Nottingham 1485 Society (a mysterious, shadowy and secretive bunch who may or may not have comprised just a single member in the form of the compulsive letter writer).

The impracticalities of this are staggering. Aside from the fact that the entire complex is statutorily protected as a scheduled monument and the Ducal Palace is a grade I listed building – how on earth would such a project be funded? It's difficult enough to raise money for the conservation of our existing historic building stock without adding to the problem. Where would all that stone come from? The Sherwood Sandstones and magnesian limestones of Mansfield are no longer extracted and reopening the quarries would be ruinously expensive. How about all those mature

oak trees needed for the floors, roof structures and timber-framing? Oak is a very pricey building material due to the rarity of 150/200-year-old trees needed for construction. Which period of the Castle's history should the building be accurate to? Norman? Henry II? Henry III? Yorkist? Civil War? Additionally, what should the rooms be filled with?

The Castle was an enormous complex of buildings, and in the mediaeval period itinerant lordship means that most of the time it would have been largely empty. What would the purposes of such a rebuilding be in the 21st century? Would people really be interested in visiting such a pastiche instead of looking at the real thing at more complete castles at Alnwick, Dover or Stokesay? Is this just the wistful nostalgia of the Disney age without consideration of the cost and practicalities? I think it may be.

### **A major Baroque palace**

Which brings us round to finding new positive attitudes about what we do have surviving at Nottingham. Firstly, I will always remain an advocate for the architectural importance of the Ducal Palace. Not only is this Italianate palace a stunningly beautiful building; it is also exceptionally rare in this country. Compare it, for example, with William Talman's design for the east elevation of Chatsworth House in Derbyshire – which receives nothing less than worldwide acclaim. The Baroque splendour of the Ducal Palace predates Chatsworth (it may have been a model for the latter) and is located in a far more spectacular location.

The Ducal Palace was also the catalyst for a tremendous spate of Neo-Classical construction throughout Nottingham in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. This fundamentally transformed the built environment of the town and included important buildings such as Newdigate House, St Nicholas parish church and Willoughby House. Yet it has only been in relatively recent times that architectural specialists have praised the quality of the building's important design scheme, with it being dubbed 'a major Baroque palace' in the pages of *Country Life*. Meanwhile, the historian Trevor Foulds concluded that it is an 'important feature in Nottingham's cityscape with an honourable place in the city's social and cultural history'.

### **Castle Museum & Art Gallery**

The importance of the building goes beyond stone and mortar. Nottingham Castle offers a phenomenally important social history which reflects almost 400 years of turbulent class struggles. A new gallery, installed within the former service courtyard, tells the history of rebellion in

Nottingham. From the raising of Charles I's standard at the Castle, which led inevitably to his fateful conflict with an incaltrant Parliament, to the anti-establishment protestors of the Reform Act riots, to the opening of the house and grounds as a public gallery and park – Nottingham Castle has been a symbol of radical dissidence. In more recent years, that nonconformist air has been recaptured through the use of the site as a location for the film of Alan Sillitoe's novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, a venue for David Walliams' play *Billionaire Boy*; and, until 2017, as the location of Nottingham's celebrated beer festival.

Take more than a casual glance at the castle grounds and the visitor will be well rewarded with in situ mediaeval remains. The thirteenth century eastern and southern curtain wall and towers of the Outer Bailey are preserved to a great height. The outer gatehouse is a very rare survival from Henry III's building campaigns and features original drum towers flanking a vaulted portal – with portcullis slots and arrow loops – that is approached over a mediaeval bridge. Internally, there are sections of the twelfth century Middle Bailey curtain walls along with the thirteenth century Black Tower. A former drawbridge, built for Henry II, once led into the Inner Bailey and still spans an impressively deep and wide mediaeval ditch. The footings of Richard's Tower still survive at the base of Castle Rock (although they remain in private ownership).

At the very summit of the Castle are the enigmatic rock-cut tunnels known as Romylowe's Cave, King David's Dungeon and Mortimer's Hole. The latter stretches all the way down to Brewhouse Yard and may have been an access to the Castle's brewery, situated where the world-famous Olde Trip To Jerusalem pub now stands. These inscrutable underground chambers are part of a network of hundreds of caves, for which Nottingham is rightly famous. Guided tours of them are a genuine highlight for visitors. At a micro-level the museum contains some remarkable artefacts such as an internationally significant collection of mediaeval alabaster sculptures.

More recently, archaeological fieldwork by Trent & Peak Archaeology has revealed traces of the mediaeval rock-cut ditch between the Upper and Middle Baileys. Work by Triskele Heritage identified the fragments of Edward IV's carved chimneypieces and an Anglo-Scandinavian grave cover which predates the establishment of the Castle. Nottingham Castle is a site still giving up its secrets.

### **Emblematic demolition?**

The very fact that the mediaeval Castle has almost vanished is a vastly significant historical moment. It was not normal practice to deliberately demolish castles to this extent. Typically, the architectural focus of the site – usually the great tower – was partially slighted and the rest of the castle asset stripped; as happened at Helmsley (North Yorkshire), Ashby (Leicestershire) and Raglan (Monmouthshire). The wholesale demolition of the castles proved to be immensely time consuming and ruinously expensive for a war-torn state that was in serious debt.

Even in the seventeenth century, opinions were divided as to what the motives for such complete destruction were. Lucy Hutchinson, wife of the former Castle governor Colonel John Hutchinson, stated that her husband was alarmed at Oliver Cromwell's high-handed behaviour and wished to remove the military potential posed by Nottingham. Major Poulton apparently lobbied the Council of State, in the absence of Cromwell, for the demolition – stating concerns over the Castle falling into the hands of royalist insurgents. Meanwhile, it was reported that Cromwell himself was 'heartily vexed' at the loss of the stronghold.

It seems probable that concerns over the strategic location versus the weakened strength of the fortress were coupled to an emblematic demolition of the site where Charles I raised his standard in 1642. Gone were both king and castle in a monumentally symbolic moment of unprecedented, politically-charged obliteration. The story of the loss of the mediaeval castle is therefore staggeringly extraordinary and deserves more nuanced and deeper appreciation.

The redevelopment of the Castle is an opportunity to retell these stories in new and innovative ways. As future generations engage with the site, it is hoped they will potentially experience it in a far less negative manner. Ultimately, the significance of the huge moments of history that the Castle has witnessed far outweighs the loss of the physical mediaeval architecture. Equally, what does survive must be rightly celebrated and positive impressions of the Ducal Palace should be renewed.

I have a great love for Nottingham Castle and I hope you will be able to experience that for yourself.



Nottingham Castle's Ducal Palace  
Photo: James Wright