

The Landmark Trust

MORPETH CASTLE, MORPETH, NORTHUMBERLAND

The building now known as Morpeth Castle was originally a gatehouse, added in about 1350 at the entrance to the castle proper. It probably replaced an earlier gatehouse which had been there for a hundred years or more. There has, in fact, been a castle in Morpeth since the Norman period. The first one stood to the North of the present site, on Ha' Hill, but was destroyed by King John in 1216. This second one was built soon afterwards, still in the 13th century. It had a stone keep, or great tower, in the centre of a courtyard or bailey, protected by the existing curtain wall. This keep is shown on the earliest map of Morpeth, dated 1604.

In 1271 Morpeth passed from its first owners, the de Merlays, to the Greystoke family. They had other castles, and Morpeth Castle seems to have become a centre of administration for local government and the law, only visited occasionally by its owner. It would have been under the control of a Constable, living there with his household, and a small garrison. There was no doubt a Steward or Bailiff as well, with a clerk, to oversee the management of Lord Greystoke's property in the area.

It is possible that the lodging for one or these important officials was on the upper floor of the imposing new gatehouse, built by William Lord Greystoke, known as the Good Baron, between 1342 and 1359. On the first floor, however, there was just one large chamber, but with two doorways and, possibly, a free-standing screen in the position of the present partition. This unusual arrangement suggests that it was a Courtroom, in which justice was dispensed. The gatehouse is strangely lacking in defensive features, such as a portcullis, and this also suggests that the building was intended mainly for ceremony and show, rather than military strength.

In the early 1500s the castle was briefly occupied by its owner, now the Lord Dacre. Here in 1515-16 he entertained Margaret, Henry VIII's sister and widowed Queen of Scotland, one of many Royal visitors to Morpeth over the centuries. His house was adorned with tapestries and there were vessels of silver to eat from. By the end of the century, however, the castle was described as "mightily decayed".

Surprisingly, the one great military event in the history of the castle was yet to come. Border raids had been an occupational hazard, but there is no record of the castle ever having been involved in serious warfare until 1644, and the Civil War. Then, in spite of grave doubts as to its strength, a Parliamentary garrison of 500 held the castle for 20 days against Montrose's Royalist force of 2,700. When they finally marched out, in full honour, it was discovered that they had only lost 23 men, as against 191 men of the besieging force.

By this time Morpeth belonged to the Howard family, who became Earls of Carlisle. For the next two hundred years the castle was largely abandoned, providing a useful source of building stone. The gatehouse, however, was lived in, and seems to have been partly remodelled in the late 1600s when an attic floor was inserted. Early 19th-century engravings show it becoming more and more dilapidated. Then, about 1860, the Earl of

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Carlisle repaired the gatehouse, as a house for his agent. The parapet was rebuilt and new windows were inserted. Inside, there were new partitions and stairs.

The castle resumed its position as an important building in Morpeth until its sale in 1916. In 1946 it was bought by the Borough Council and became for a while a very unusual council house. By the 1980s, expensive repairs were needed, particularly to the roof. The castle fell vacant, and quickly became derelict. A new solution for its future was urgently sought by the Borough Council. In 1988 the Council granted a lease to the Landmark Trust. The restoration of Morpeth Castle was completed in the autumn of 1991, since when it has been let all year round for holidays available to all.

A TOUR OF MORPETH CASTLE AND DETAILS OF ITS RESTORATION

In restoring of Morpeth Castle, the Landmark Trust set out to recover a little of the tower's medieval layout, but also to retain something of the later houses that were made within it in the 17th century and especially in 1860. The long history of the building is therefore visible, perhaps for the first time.

Outside the tower

The tall windows, the corbelled parapet and the corner turrets, which make up the front of the tower, all date from the Victorian rebuilding, but its appearance in the Middle Ages was not much different. The design of the windows has changed, but they occupied roughly the same positions as now. Passing through the stone arch, the rooms on either side were the guardrooms, watching over the entrance to the castle. Once inside the gate, there are stables and outbuildings on your right. These probably date from 1860.

The entrance

The ground level inside the castle has risen over the centuries, so that it now slopes up inside the gate, almost to the level of the main door to the upper floors of the castle. This was probably reached originally by steps at the side of the building. The door surround itself is Victorian, but it is in the same place as the medieval entrance. The Landmark Trust removed a single storey extension added on this side of the tower in about 1916.

Inside the tower - first floor

Opening off a passage to the right are two doors, of which the second, although much altered, was originally the grander. When this floor was used as a courtroom, the first door was for the prisoners and guards; the second for the justices. A free-standing screen in the position of the present partition probably divided the room, so that the sitting room, in the larger end, is much as it was in the Middle Ages. Ahead as you enter this room is a cupboard, or aumbrey, where the seals and paraphernalia of justice were displayed.

Both ends of the room had fireplaces. That in the sitting room, however, has been much hacked about in recent years and has lost its original mouldings. Also at both ends are garderobes, or privies. The walls have been re-plastered and limewashed, and nearly all the joinery is new, including the oak-boarded ceiling.

The second floor

The decision to reinstate the original newel staircase caused a minor problem because either in the 17th century or in 1860, the level of the second floor had been lowered by about two feet. Landmark decided to keep to the existing, lower, floor level, so some steps had to be built to bridge the gap between it and the threshold of the medieval door. Under the threshold two 19th-century shoes were discovered.

The second floor was probably always divided into two or more rooms. The present arrangement of the partitions is almost entirely new, however, as are the floorboards. There is another garderobe in the corner of the large bedroom, like those on the floor below. In the bathroom the window sill contains a stone sink, or slop-stone, showing that this floor was always domestic. It possibly formed a self-contained apartment or lodging for one of the castle officials.

The roof

The Landmark Trust put back local stone slates of the kind that would have covered the roof originally. They came from Ladycross Quarry near Allendale, south west of Hexham. The lead was also renewed and the wall-walk itself paved with York stone slabs.

The restoration of Morpeth Castle was supervised by the Edinburgh architects, Stewart Tod and Partners. The builders were Bowden & Co of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Archaeological investigations were funded by English Heritage, which also gave a grant towards the cost of the repairs.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Morpeth Castle sleeps up to 7 people. To book Morpeth Castle or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit our website www.landmarktrust.org.uk or phone Booking Enquiries on 01628 825925.