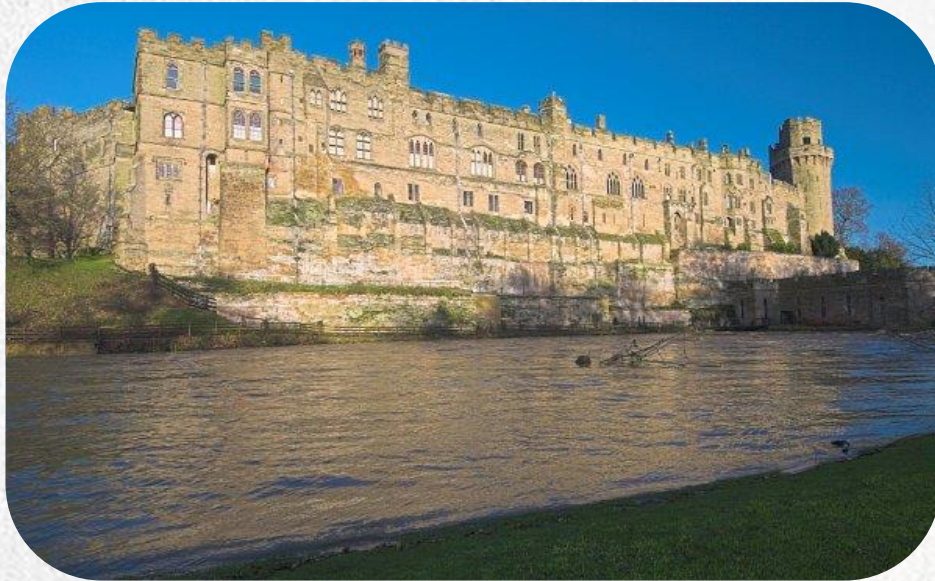




DEFENDING A CASTLE

Learning Resource

LOCATION LOCATION LOCATION



A castle's defensive capability can be greatly enhanced by its location.

At Warwick for example the castle is built upon a cliff which drops down to the River Avon. This makes it almost impossible to attack from this side.

The river means that siege weapons could not be placed close to the castle and were therefore less effective.

A castle's location must also, however, be a compromise.

A castle built on top of a mountain would be a brilliant location for defence, but would be difficult and expensive to build, and would be hard for even friends to reach.

BUILD YOUR CASTLE FROM THE GROUND UP

We often think about a castle's defences in terms of its walls, towers and turrets; but castle builders placed defences around the castle to make it difficult for attackers to approach.



The toilets of Warwick castle emptied into its moat. A smelly but effective extra defence.

Many castles had moats, often, but not always, filled with water. Warwick Castle has a dry moat as it is high above the water line.

It is still very effective and would have been hard to cross with siege engines and would have been littered with sharpened stakes at its base to deter soldiers.

BUILD YOUR CASTLE ON A HILL

A hill is a very strong defence, it makes it impossible for an army to use a Belfry tower, and difficult for soldiers to climb.



The hill upon which Warwick Castle is built is man made.

The steep slope would have made the approach to the castle treacherous for foot soldiers.

The slope also made the use of scaling ladders difficult as they would have been unstable, making them easy to push over.

CURTAIN WALLS



Castle walls, known as 'curtain walls', were incredibly strong and their design was very clever.

The stones used on the outer surfaces were solid and placed in a classic overlapping pattern.

Within the wall was a cavity which was filled with softer stones and rubble.

Such a design meant that the outer section could withstand great punishment, whilst the softer inner cavity allowed the wall to absorb blows from projectiles hurled at it from siege engines.

THE BATTLEMENTS



The area on top of the castle wall is known as the battlements.

From here the castle garrison could mount its defence.

The battlements feature crenulations (the up and down part of the wall). These gave the defenders a safe place to fire arrows.

The battlements also feature arrow loops (sometimes called arrow slits), from where the castle's crossbowmen could shoot in almost total safety. The cross design of the loops meant that they could fire at all angles

THE TOWERS



Castle towers were built very high, to give a good view of the surrounding countryside and also of course to make them difficult to climb.

They were often round or multi sided, as in the case of Guy's tower in Warwick. This made them stronger against projectiles and more difficult to undermine.

The turret at the top of Guy's tower overhangs and features machicolations (holes in its base), through which soldiers could drop rocks and boiling liquids on those below.

INSIDE THE TOWER



The spiral staircase needed to climb the tower is another great defence mechanism. It is narrow, allowing only one person to climb at a time.

The clockwise spiral makes it difficult for an attacker to wield his weapon. This problem is not shared by the defender who is facing the other way. (People in the middle ages were forced to be right handed, as to be otherwise was believed to come from the Devil).

Every so often one of the steps would have been built slightly higher than the rest causing an incautious attacker to trip and fall.

WHY NOT USE THE FRONT DOOR?

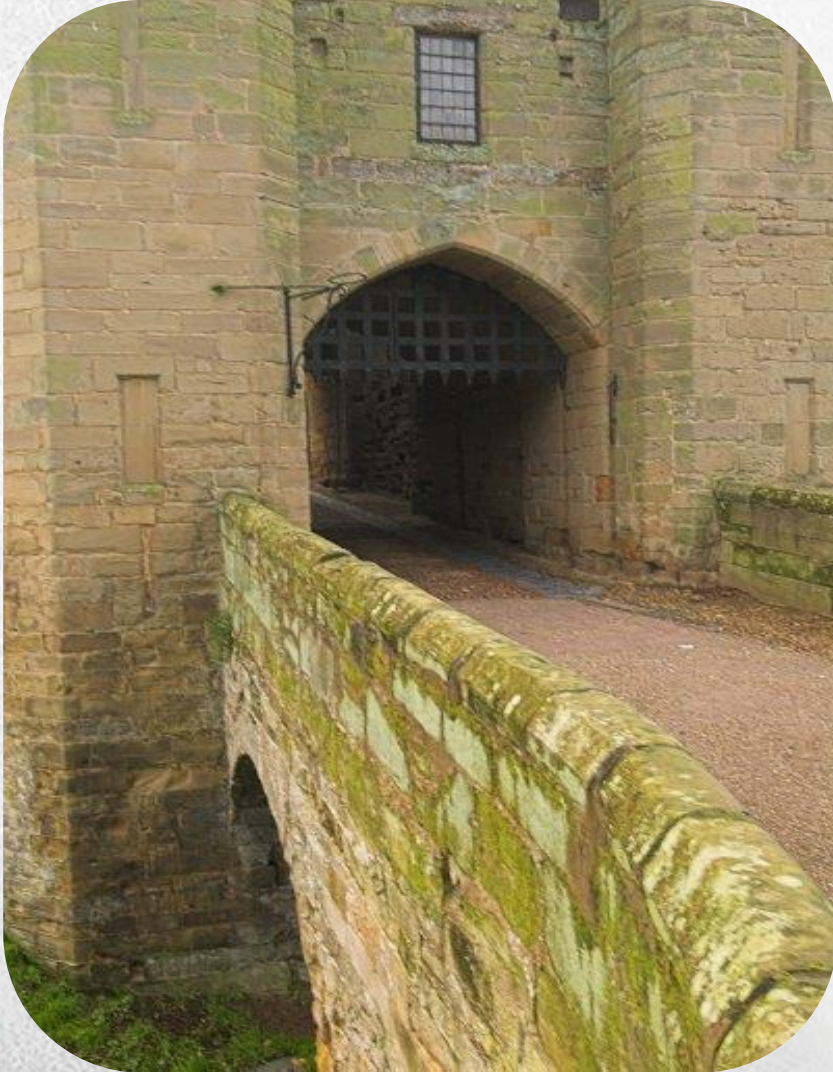


Given that it is so difficult to attack the walls and towers, an attacking army would often make an attack on the castle's entrance, known at Warwick castle as the barbican and gatehouse.

It is after all the front door of the castle and consequently a weak point.

This is the reason that many of the most terrifying defences of any castle are installed at its entrance.

THE BARBICAN AND GATEHOUSE



Today access to the barbican is by a stone bridge.

However, during the middle ages an attacking army would have had to figure out a way of pulling a wooden drawbridge down in order to cross the moat and reach the entrance

They would then be faced with the first of two portcullises. These heavy oak gates would have been dropped closed at the first sight of the enemy.

The oak was clad with iron, which gave it protection from axes.

TERROR FROM ABOVE



Should attackers succeed in traversing the moat and raising or destroying the portcullis, they would then be faced with perhaps the greatest fear of any enemy soldier attempting to breach a castle:

Murder holes.

These are holes cut into the roof of the barbican, through which the defenders of the castle would drop rocks, stones and boiling liquids down upon the heads of the unfortunate soldiers below

The barbican is not a pleasant place to be in time of war.

DO YOU REALLY WANT TO ATTACK THIS CASTLE?



An attacking army has many machines, weapons and methods at its disposal when facing a castle.

However, as you have seen castles have many different defences at their disposal to thwart any attack.

The commander of enemy forces would have to think very carefully about how important it was to take a castle, considering its defences and the damage it might inflict on his army should he choose to attack.



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