

Attacking a Castle

Learning Resource

Why were castles so important?



Castles in medieval England served a number of purposes

They defended an area of the country and secured it from attack.

Castles were often sited in areas of strategic importance

- In important towns or cities.
- On key travel and trade routes
- Close to large river crossings or estuaries

Castles could not be ignored and tied up the men of attacking armies

- If they ignored a castle, an attacking army would risk attack from behind or having their supply lines cut

Castles were the ultimate symbol of medieval power

- The more castles there were in the country, the greater the control over the population

The Aim of Your Attack



You might also decide to lay siege to the castle in order to starve the people out

The main aim of an attacking army was to capture and kill the people inside. You may also want to keep the castle for yourselves.

However to do this you must first get into the castle.

There are many different methods at your disposal to enable you do this.

You could:

- Go over the walls
- Go under the walls
- Destroy the walls
- Attack through a weak point such as a gateway or the corner of a tower

Attacking The defenders of the castle



An archer with a longbow



A crossbowman

The main weapons used to take out the defenders of a castle would be the longbow and the crossbow.

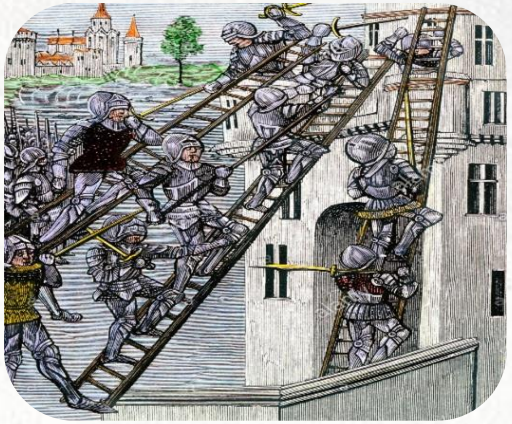
- A longbow could be fired more rapidly up to twelve times a minute
- Crossbows took much longer to load but were more powerful than longbows

Getting over the walls

There were two main methods to scale (climb) the walls of a castle.

Scaling Ladders

These could be placed against the wall for the soldiers to climb. They were unstable however, and easy to push over.



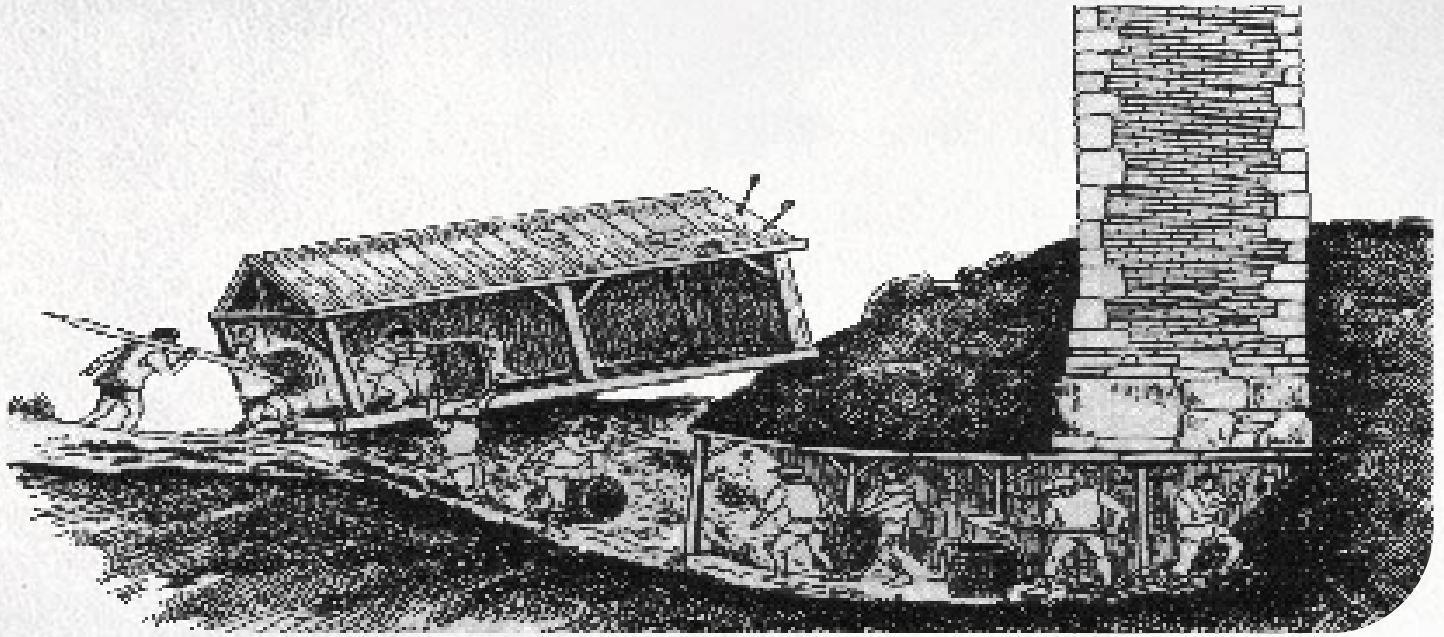


A Siege or Belfry Tower

The Siege Tower was on wheels and could be rolled up next to the walls.

This was difficult if there was a moat which would have to be filled in. And impossible if the castle was built on a hill.

Getting under the walls

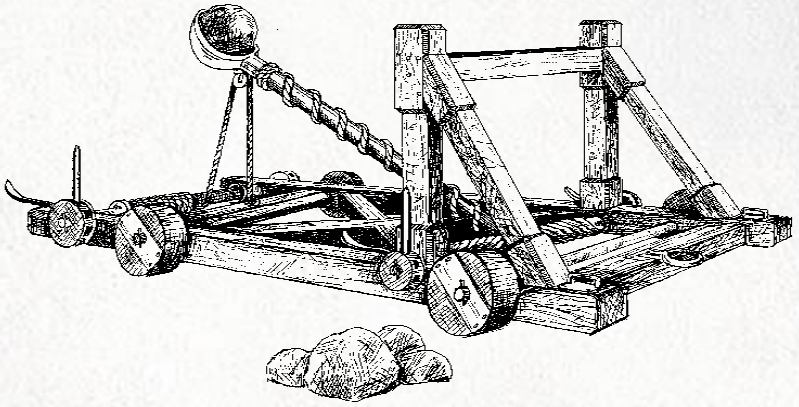


- Siege mining was actually used as a method to destroy the castle walls, rather than as a way to get into the castle via a tunnel.
- The miners would dig their tunnel, using wooden beams to support the roof.
- They would then fill the tunnel with pig fat, which burns fiercely. This burning fat would destroy the wood supports and bring the castle walls crashing down into the tunnel.

KNOCKING THE WALL DOWN

There were many different types of siege engine (machines for attacking castle walls).

The catapult used a series of tightened ropes to cause a throwing arm to hurl a rock, stone or other projectile at a castle wall.

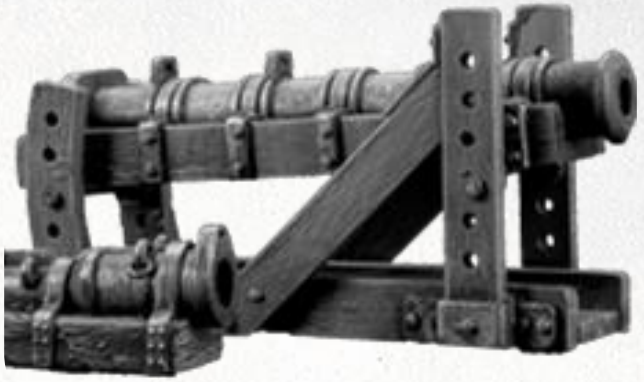


The Balista was almost like a giant bow and arrow. As with the catapult it used a series of tightened ropes and pulleys to loose a huge bolt and sometimes rocks at the castle.



More Siege Engines

Cannons were relatively crude during most of the middle ages. They could only be fired a few times a day and were prone to exploding, killing their operators.



Also they mainly fired stone balls which would disintegrate on impact. In fact the effect of a cannon at this time was mainly bad. Think of all that smoke and noise.



Battering rams would be wheeled up to the doors or the corners of the castle to knock them down.

They would be protected by a canopy or shed against the defenders dropping stones or hot liquid on them.

The Mighty Trebuchet



The name Trebuchet means overarm. The job of this king of siege engines was not to aim at castle walls but to rain down terror on the people inside from above.

It would not only launch rocks into a castle, but also fireballs, dead and rotting animals; to spread disease, in a kind of early biological warfare. At other times it would launch the severed heads of captured soldiers, spreading terror and a warning to those who resist.

The Siege, perhaps the surest way to defeat a castle

As you have seen, there were many ways to attack a castle. But perhaps the surest and least bloody was simply to surround it and lay it to siege.

By the time the starving inhabitants were reduced to boiling and eating their own shoes, they would almost certainly be ready to surrender.

However, a siege took a very long time and the attacking army were always vulnerable to any army coming to the aid of the castle defenders.

A siege was therefore never the first choice of the commander of an attacking army.





LOOKING FOR MORE?

Visit our website for more educational resources:

www.warwick-castle.com