

A Short History Of Dudley Castle

By Adrian Durkin



A model of the castle from 1070

Dudley Castle, like many castles in England, was founded shortly after the Norman Conquest of 1066. A formidable French knight by the name of Ansculf, who came from Picquigney, near Amiens, gained the estate of Dudley in 1070, following the unsuccessful rebellion of the Saxon lord, Earl Edwin of Mercia.

Ansculf constructed a fortification of earth and timber, known as a Motte and Bailey Castle. To this day the shape of the original structure can still be seen. The Castle was mentioned in the Domesday book survey of 1086, and at that time was being held by Ansculf's son, William.

At the beginning of the 12th century, the Castle passed to the de Paganel family. How they obtained the barony is uncertain. In the 1130's Dudley Castle was refortified by Ralf Paganel. When a civil war known as "The Anarchy" broke out in 1135, Ralf sided with Empress Matilda, the daughter of Henry I. As a result of this, Dudley Castle was laid under siege by her cousin, King Stephen, in 1138. Stephen failed to take the well-fortified Castle, so he took his temper out on the surrounding area and people, before marching off to attack and destroy Shrewsbury Castle. This is confirmed by documentary evidence which also hints strongly that the castle was stone-built by then.

Very little remains of the de Paganel Castle, for in 1175 Ralf's son, Gervaise Paganel, supported an unsuccessful rebellion against King Henry II. As a punishment the fortifications of Dudley Castle were partially demolished. For the next 100 years or so, Dudley Castle was little more than an undefended manor house.



A Norman arch between the kitchen and the buttery – one of the few remaining traces of the Paganel Castle.

Gervaise died in 1194, but before he did, he carried out his father's wishes by building the Priory of St James at the foot of Castle Hill. The Priory was inhabited by Cluniac Monks, who, like their parent order the Benedictines, wore black robes. Unfortunately the Priory was demolished during Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, but its ruins can still be seen today in Priory Park.

Dudley Castle passed through marriage to the de Somery family. In 1264 Roger de Somery II supported King Henry III during another Barons' revolt and was granted permission to refortify the Castle as a reward. Work began on a new Tower or Keep, a Gatehouse, and a set of defensive walls. Many of the subsequent de Somerys lived rather short lives and it is believed that the majority of this work was completed by the last of the name, John de Somery, the bad baron of Dudley Castle, who was accused of raising money for the building of the Castle through murder and robbery in the neighbouring villages. John de Somery's son predeceased him and he died without male heirs in 1321, much to the relief of the locals!

Following John de Somery's death, the Castle passed to his sister, who had married into the de Sutton family. In the mid 14th Century these de Sutton heirs added an extra gatehouse, or barbican, to the main gatehouse. This area of the Castle became known as "The Triple Gate". The de Suttons also built the chapel, its Undercroft and adjacent private chambers.

The Castle had a relatively calm succession of de Sutton lords (the majority were named John). John de Sutton VI was quite a remarkable man, as he lived to the age of 86 years and managed to die in his bed despite being heavily involved in The Wars of the Roses, where he actually fought on both sides (first with the Lancastrians and later with the Yorkists). He survived the Wars, and died in 1487.

By now England had become a relatively peaceful place. The Tudor family ruled England, and anyone brave (or stupid) enough to defy them rarely lived to tell the tale.

By 1532 the current lord, John de Sutton VII, was penniless. His only option was to permit a distant relative to take over his debts, and the castle with them. This man would become Dudley Castle's most famous lord, Sir John Dudley. John Dudley was extremely rich, powerful, and ambitious. He achieved the titles of Viscount Lisle, Earl of Warwick, and Duke of Northumberland. His finest hour was when he became the most important advisor to the young King Edward VI, with the titles of Lord President of the Council and Earl Marshall of England.

After he acquired Dudley Castle, he commissioned the architect Sir William Sharrington, who had travelled in Italy, to design a new range of domestic buildings within the courtyard in the very latest renaissance style.

The history books do not remember Sir John Dudley for his work at Dudley Castle, for he was the man who hatched the plot to place his daughter-in-law, Lady Jane Grey, onto the English throne in place of Mary Tudor following the

death of Edward VI in 1553. Lady Jane Grey became famously known as “The 9 Days Queen”. During her short reign, Sir John Dudley’s fellow conspirators deserted him and handed him over to Mary. He was executed for treason at The Tower of London in August 1553. Lady Jane Grey and her husband, Guildford Dudley, were also executed.

Following John Dudley’s death, Dudley Castle returned to Edward Sutton, the heir of the legitimate family. In 1575 Dudley Castle saw one of its most prestigious events, with the visit of Queen Elizabeth I, as part of her progress throughout the kingdom. Sadly, shortly after that event Dudley Castle began to decline in importance. The Lords of Dudley preferred to live in the more comfortable surroundings of Himley Hall, (now a beautiful stately home situated about 3 miles outside Dudley).

The Castle’s earlier defences had remained largely untouched during Sir John Dudley’s rebuilding, so Dudley Castle was back in the picture when the English Civil War broke out in 1642. It was garrisoned by Royalist troops, and was laid under siege twice. The first siege was in 1644. A royalist attempt to relieve the siege resulted in a skirmish fought in Tipton Green, near to the present day Black Country Living Museum. Although both sides claimed victory, it was technically a Royalist victory, as they succeeded in beating off the Parliamentarians and holding the Castle for the next two years.

Despite their victory at Tipton Green, the war elsewhere was not going the way of the Royalists. After their defeat at the battle of Naseby in 1645, the king was unable to co-ordinate serious resistance to Parliament. The Parliamentarian forces began the process of reducing Royalist strongholds one by one. A Parliamentarian General, Sir William Brereton, MP for Cheshire, advanced towards Dudley for the second siege. The attack saw more skirmishing (including one at the Priory), but the Royalists had to face the facts that they were fighting a lost cause. Colonel Leveson, commander of the Royalist garrison, surrendered the Castle on the 13th May 1646. The war was over for Dudley.

Dudley Castle suffered the same fate as most of the Royalist garrisons, in that its defences were demolished. The Keep, gatehouse, and defensive walls were all sleighted, and Dudley’s role as a fortress ended forever in 1647. However the domestic buildings of the Castle were allowed to remain intact, and they were used occasionally for the next hundred years or so by the Ward family, who had succeeded the Suttons.

The real end of the castle came in 1750 when a devastating fire swept through the remains. Rumour had it that the local militia kept their gunpowder in the

castle, and, for fear of explosions, nothing was done to put out the fire, so Dudley Castle simply became “A Romantic Ruin”.

During the nineteenth Century, Dudley Castle was a popular haunt for courting couples, a children’s playground, and a location for many artists and painters. Dudley Museum and Art Gallery has an extensive collection of drawings, etchings, prints and pictures of the castle. The Earls of Dudley still kept a watchful eye over the Castle, and undertook some necessary rebuilding of various parts of the Castle over the century.

Today, Dudley Castle is a popular tourist attraction, surrounded by a zoological garden. Even though its turbulent history has left only a ruined shell behind, the Keep still stands majestically on the summit of Castle Hill, visible from many miles away. And at night time it can still cast an eerie and ominous shadow over the town of Dudley.

*For full details of *The Castle and the Barony*, please read [the book](#).*