



Dudley Castle Dissected: The Stables

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Immediately to the west of the Triple Gate is a rectangular building now commonly called “The Stables” but also known as “The Lodgings”. This structure appears to have been the last major piece of work at Dudley Castle prior to destruction in 1750. However the site it occupies has a long history prior to the last building being constructed.

In 1070 when the castle was first built this area would have been a part of the moat which separated the motte from the bailey. At that time the Triple Gate and other surrounding structures would have been constructed of wood but of these nothing has survived. The most limited excavation within the Stables revealed a glimpse of the western edge of the moat where it was cut through the bedrock.

In the 12th and again in the 13th centuries the castle was refortified in stone. To the east we have the gatehouse whilst to the south we have the curtain wall and to the west is the motte with its new Keep. The central area should have

remained a part of the moat but intriguing fragments of surviving masonry and very limited excavation have revealed that this was not the case. Within the west wall are the remains of a blocked in arch, to the north of this arch is an area of very rough masonry which denotes the position of a wall which once ran eastwards. To the north again is another block of masonry consisting of large, very regular and well-worn limestone blocks. These are unlike any other limestone blocks used at the castle. This masonry forms the corner or a building which is much earlier than the Stables. The surviving corner was strengthened with a buttress whilst the arch would once have been keyed into the curtain wall and gives every indication of having been a vault rather than a simple arch. Excavation occurred during the removal of the large water tanks which were installed in the recent past. This work revealed a little more of the foundations of this structure. We found a large masonry plinth beneath the blocked archway, with a corresponding plinth at the eastern end of the stables, also a wall about half way between the plinths running from north to south.

Bearing in mind that these structures were built right across the moat their use can only have been as a method of crossing the moat in order to gain access to the Keep. This building seems to have been a complex vaulted bridge dating to the early medieval period and one must assume that above the vaulted passage were battlements and maybe turrets providing a heavily defended crossing.

Despite excavations behind the blocked arch no trace was found of the steep staircase which must once have given access to the motte top. It must be noted that the moat area between these walls had not yet been filled in so we might surmise that the floor of the passage consisted of timber planks over the empty space below; we might presume that these could be removed if the castle were to be attacked providing yet another defensive element.

In the later medieval period we have a complex sequence of changes to the entrance buildings, here I present a perhaps over simplified version of these changes. It would appear that the original arrangements required improving, consequently a tower was constructed to the west of the previously mentioned arch. The staircase which once led to the motte top was replaced by the basement of this new tower. This basement could function as a new obstacle to would-be attackers because now the approach to the motte top was via the top of the vault which once protected the original moat crossing. At the level of the motte therefore the tower had its gates facing east and west whilst to the north the remains of two arrow loops still survive in the masonry. The floor of the tower could again be removed if an attacker threatened revealing the aforementioned drop pit. This new tower was built with a wall running around the motte to the front (north) of the Keep. This revetment wall provided yet another defensive element. Unfortunately little more can be said of this phase of the castle's development because so little else has survived both above or below the ground, and yet one engraving has survived showing a substantial archway in the appropriate position for our new tower. I am always suspicious of artistic

license but maybe this is a true depiction of the tower surviving even after the construction of “The Stables” as they now stand.

It would appear that this arrangement survived up to the civil war even though recent excavations have shown that the moat was filled in during the 16th century as part of the Duke of Northumberland’s new building programme. However in 1647 in the aftermath of the war the castle was slighted. Not only the Keep and The Triple Gate were affected but also the curtain wall where stretches were demolished in order to make the castle indefensible. The entrance previously described was destroyed at this time.

The castle was occupied until the fire of 1750 and it seems that the ugly gaps in the curtain wall were not appreciated by the family so sometime before 1700 it was decided to fill them with masonry. It is at this point that the “Stables” were built. Consisting of two storeys, this building is an irregular rectangle squeezed into the space between the Triple gate and the surviving gatehouse turret to the west. The building makes use of these walls as it does of the slighted curtain wall for the foundations of its southern wall. The northern wall facing into the courtyard contains windows, doors and string courses of sandstone with finely executed moulded detail, surely too elaborate for such a humble use as a stable? Yet the limited excavations produced sufficient evidence to justify the title. On exposing the floor it was discovered that the northern portion was of stone flags whilst the southern was of bricks, a raised kerb separated the two parts. This arrangement is common where the bricks provide a comfortable standing area, not so hard that it would damage the horses’ hooves, whilst the flags provide an easily cleaned grooming area. The first floor of the building may provide the answer to the stables alternative name “The Lodgings”. Access to this is via a doorway in the western wall at first floor level (it must have been reached by an external staircase or a ladder). This doorway has been partially blocked at a more recent date although I do not know why.

Again one must assume that the building fell out of use or was destroyed in the 1750 fire.

Its more recent history involves the installation of large water tanks to supply the zoo’s animal enclosures. In the recent restoration it was noted that the masonry looked unsafe and concrete tie beams were inserted to hold the building together. The instability is probably due to the nature of the material upon which it is founded, which is unconsolidated moat backfill. The water tanks were recently removed and it is to be hoped that future development of the castle will involve the weatherproofing of the Stables and the usage of the space provided to enhance the castles interest for future visitors.