Chapter 1

Introduction

The English traveller in France seeking the local castle and asking for the *château* may be surprised to find himself directed to an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century mansion, for he should have added the adjective *fort* or *féodal* in order to be understood. Although the English *castle* (old French *chastel*, from Latin *castellum*) is derived from French, and no doubt had exactly the same sense for French speakers on both sides of the Channel in the twelfth century, there has been a divergence since that time. In French the word denotes the status of the building and its owner, a seigneurial seat, which is close to the original meaning, while in English of today the word has an almost exclusively functional meaning, a residence with massive defences. There is perhaps an analogy with German where the word for medieval castle is *Burg*, although there is no English equivalent for the German *Schloss*, a post-Renaissance seigneurial seat. We shall have to return to the question of status implied in the castle, but first the English functional definition can be employed to eliminate what does not fall within the scope of this book.

A castle is a fortified residence in which the fortifications predominate over the domestic aspect of the structure, and the occupant normally owns or controls a large territory around it. This cuts out tribal hill-forts, Roman forts, Tudor and later coastal forts and so on. The very photogenic forts of Henry VIII are often called 'castles' (Wardour Castle, Deal Castle, St Mawes Castle . . . etc.), but were really defended batteries, i.e. forts with a master-gunner in charge. The distinction between a castle and other forms of residence can perhaps be best illustrated by the two Wingfields. Only the moat, gatehouse and parts of the curtain wall survive at the late fourteenth-century castle of Wingfield, Suffolk (fig. 1), but, in spite of the 'flushwork' ornament on the gatehouse towers, the portcullis groove, arrow slits, moat and most important the curtain wall with wall-walk and parapet, were not ornamental. South Wingfield, Derbyshire (fig. 44) has very properly been called a 'manor', since it was erected in the fifteenth century, for it has no moat, no portcullises, no arrow slits and, most important, no wall-walk and parapet. It is the existence of a

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massive wall encircling the site, thick enough for defenders to stand on its top behind the shelter of a parapet, that as rule of thumb is the distinguishing feature of a castle. The disposition and form of the residential buildings within the castle had to be adapted to fit within this wall to which they played second fiddle; the story in this book is very largely one of the house trying to escape from this crippling prison.

There remains one very important category of late medieval structure that has to be brought into the definition: the tower-houses of Scotland, Ireland and the Border areas erected between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries and known as castles. They are most familiar to us from the first two volumes of the great work of MacGibbon and Ross. Where they occur on the Continent, in the Basque area of the Pyrenees for instance,[1] they fall below seigneurial status and so are not counted as castles by the French definition. However on the English functional definition, as permanently occupied residences whose form is entirely dominated by defence, they clearly must be classed as castles. They are perhaps best described as a different *species* within the same *genus*: *Castrum turris* as opposed to *Castrum castrum*.

John Leland writing in *c*. 1540 commented with some surprise that the manor house at South Wingfield far surpassed the castle at Sheffield. He was shocked at the presumption, the status of a castle being so much higher than a manor. Castles had their origin in a society where land was held by military service and a fortified residence was a privilege accorded to great landowners. Only a very restricted social level were entitled to construct them, and normally they served as the administrative centre for a large area. They might be the *caput* (head) of an honour, often associated with the earldom of a county. As the Middle Ages advanced, the social changes by which military tenure was replaced by a cash relationship between tenant and landlord undermined the position of the castle, to some extent depriving it of its social significance; its occupant became simply a great landlord. By the sixteenth century (particularly on newly-acquired monastic lands), it was possible for English noblemen to live in ordinary houses (Burghley, Longleat etc.) using them as their main seats, although it was difficult for Tudor antiquaries to adjust themselves to such changes; in the more rigid society of France the nobility overcame the problem by using the old name for a new type of structure. The status conferred on its owner by a castle not only prolonged the life of the real object but gave almost indefinite endurance to the forms associated with it, like towers and machicolations.

Enough has been said to show that the word 'castle' has had very different connotations in different countries at different times. In the period

1400–1660 with which we are concerned it will be increasingly apparent that its history took a very different course in this country from that of our near neighbours; our understanding will be much greater if an eye is kept on them to compare and contrast their experience with ours. Most of the generalisations that are made about the period will certainly need to be modified. For example, artillery was in very active use in France in sieges in the early fifteenth century but castles multiplied, not decreased, in numbers, while in England, where artillery was only slightly used in sieges until the Civil War, castles freely expired of their own accord in the fifteenth century. Comfort is said to have been the main motive for abandoning castles in this country but it can hardly have weighed heavily in the minds of the constructors of tower-houses in Scotland and Ireland in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The insular position of England is said to have given it special advantages, but the insular position of Ireland only led to a tower-house culture analogous to that in Scotland. The French monarchy was hostile to castles and under Henry IV, or more especially under Richelieu, took active steps to demolish them, while the English Government (until the Interregnum) not

1 The gatehouse of fourteenth-century Wingfield Castle, Suffolk; although it has ornamental features like the flushwork and window tracery, the portcullis groove, arrow slits, moat and curtain wall on either side imply serious defence.

only took no action to restrict them but also seems to have deplored their accelerating decay. These apparent contradictions will only be understood if we go beyond the simple generalisations and try to reach the underlying factors.

The two main institutions that we associate with the Middle Ages, castles and monasteries, are so often thought of together (at least since the Romantic period) that the fundamental differences are forgotten. A monastery was founded on a piece of land given in perpetuity so that the religious, supported by their endowments, could celebrate the divine office there for evermore. It was permanent – perpetuity was its business. A castle, a fortified residence, had no such claims to permanence. The costs of its erection, the estate organisation that grew up about it or the village or town with which it was associated might make it difficult to abandon it and move elsewhere, but there was certainly no inherent reason why this should not be done. The history of the castle is indeed largely a history of abandonment, very frequently in its early history when it was usually constructed of perishable wood that required frequent renewal, less frequent when the walls were built of stone so that its capital value or costs of renewal on an alternative site were infinitely greater. It is not abandonment that is new, although this no doubt accelerated in the fifteenth century, but the virtual end of any kind of replacement of those structures that had become ruinous by new ones built on a new site, or even on the old site, that is distinctive of the period under review.

In the last few years the arithmetic of castles has become a little clearer; according to a recent list[2] there would have been about 1,700 examples in England and Wales, excluding some 270 tower-houses in the Border areas. Some 14,000 castles (5,500 earthwork remains) have been listed for the German-speaking areas of Europe,[3] although no doubt an underestimate. If one allows for France, the homeland of castles, Italy, Spain and so on, perhaps a reasonable guess for a total in western Europe (the Slavic *kremlin* of eastern Europe is not a castle but more akin to a Greek *acropolis*) could be 75,000 to 100,000. The total for England and Wales is then only a tiny portion, 2–3%, of the European total.

About 700 of the 1,700 castles in this country have visible masonry, although masonry may lie concealed beneath the turf in a good many cases in the remaining 1,000 earthworks. The vast majority of these castles have no written history of any kind; in 1959 an historian was able to tabulate only 327 castles recorded in the written sources of 1154–1216.[4] The earthworks are usually, not invariably, of the motte-and-bailey form, a conical mound with a flat top (the motte) and an attached

embanked enclosure (the bailey). The timber defences that crowned them no longer survive but are vividly portrayed for us in the Bayeux tapestry. Figure 2 shows the distribution of mottes throughout the British Isles. Their great density on the Welsh border or in Dyfed no doubt reflects the prolonged struggle of their Norman builders with the native Welsh. Further west in Ireland they are common in the eastern part of the island but die out in the west; the Norman invasion began in 1169 so it is almost as if during the process of conquest the practice of erecting mottes died out.

The figures for the large annual expenditure on castle construction recorded by the sheriffs of each county in the Pipe Rolls, tabulated with
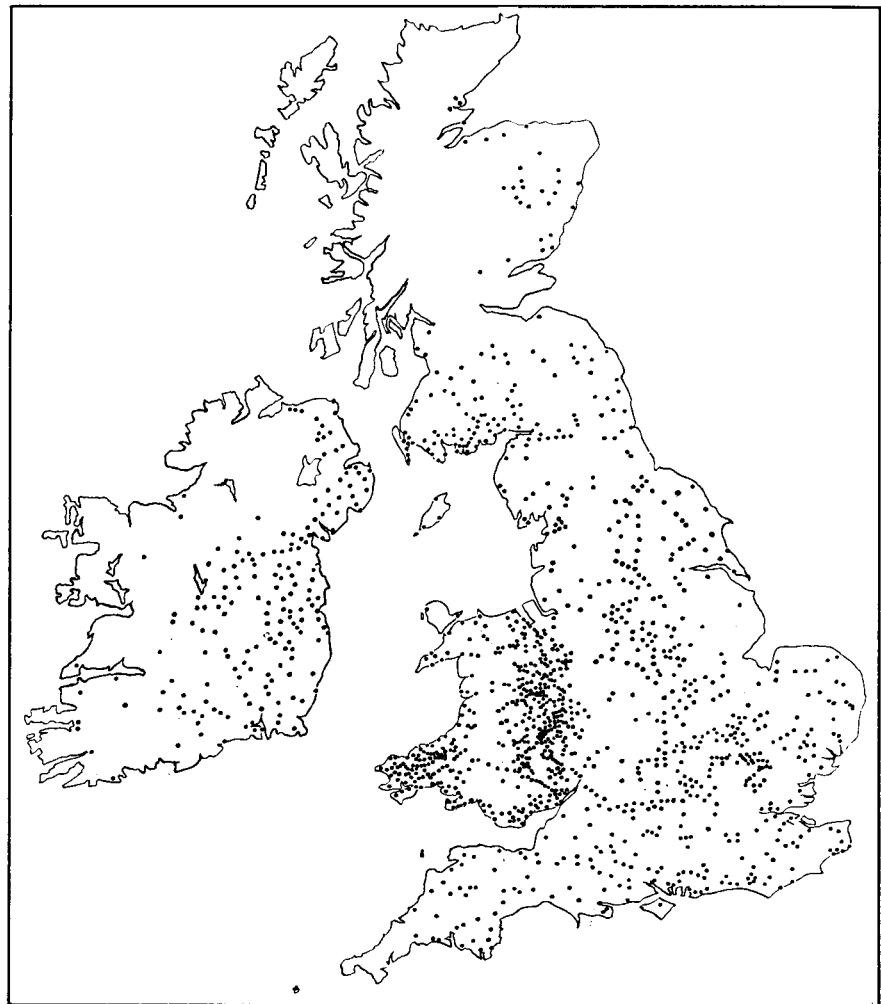

2 A map of Norman mottes in Great Britain and Ireland; note their thick distribution on the Welsh border and rarity in west Ireland, which was invaded from the east in the late twelfth century. (D. F. Renn)

painstaking care by modern historians, confirm the evidence of our own eyes that, in the second half of the twelfth century, Henry II went a long way towards transforming the nature of the castle in this country. By the end of the century the term could hardly be applied to a structure that was not stone. Cheap and hastily erected earth-and-timber fortifications were out, and expensive stone structures, only within the means of the rich, were in. Although not provable, it is reasonable to assume that the construction of mottes had ceased by *c.* 1200 and their use, unless fortified with stone, had virtually terminated by the end of the following century.

Most of the sites marked on the map therefore exist today as grass-grown mounds plotted by the Ordnance Surveyors on their sheets, but otherwise unknown to historians. The vast abandonment that led to this

3 Speed's map of Ely in 1611 showing in the foreground the long-since abandoned Norman motte with a windmill on top.
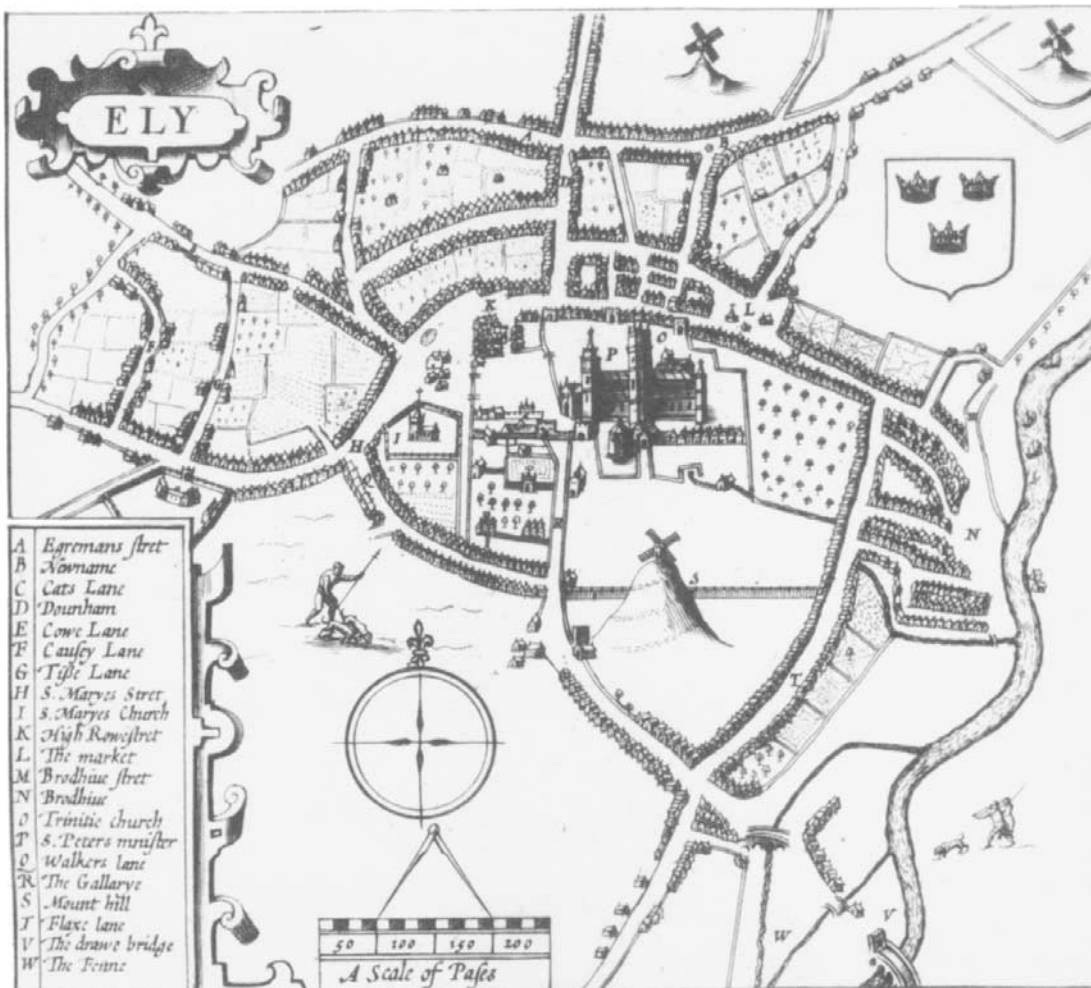
must have taken place in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Speed, in 1611, showed the motte at Ely with a windmill on top when the true nature of its origin had been forgotten (fig. 3). He showed other abandoned mottes at Bedford, Stamford and Worcester. His concern was of course with towns but the vast majority of the abandoned sites are in rural areas.

So, in the period after 1400 with which this book is concerned, the castles still in use were the survivors of a much larger number that had existed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Abandonment was not a new thing but a continual process, a sword of Damocles, as it were, that had hung over most castles since their erection.

4 Speed's map of Worcester in 1611 showing the abandoned castle with a prison in its bailey (16, 17).
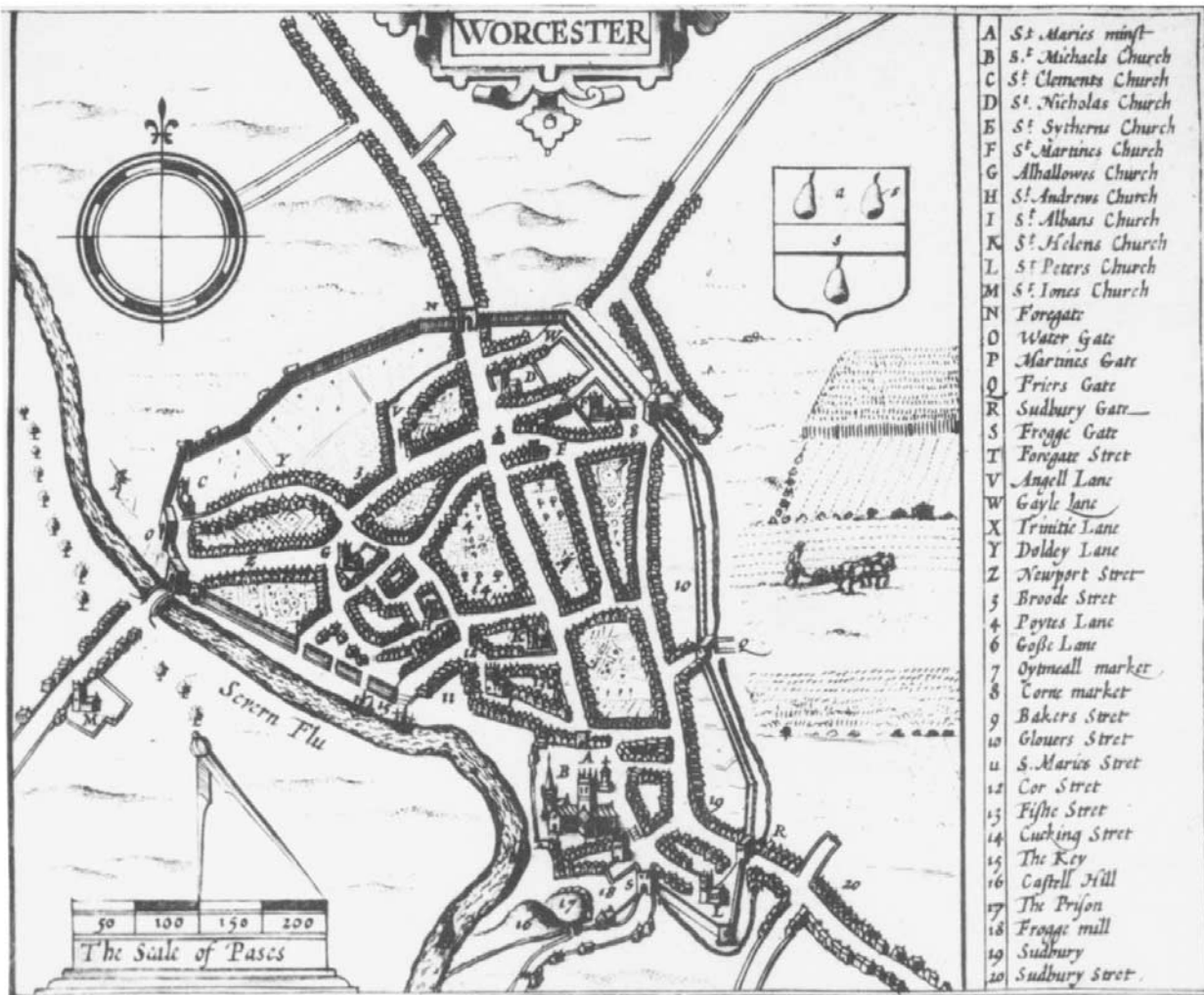
Monasteries associated with castles in the Middle Ages

Religious order	11th C.	12th C.	13th C.	14th C.	15th C.	16th C.
Benedictine	14	13	—	1	—	—
Cluniac	7	6	—	—	—	—
Alien (Benedictine)	15	7	—	—	—	—
Augustinian	2	27 (1 alien)	2	3	—	—
Premonstratensian	—	6	—	—	—	—
Cistercian	—	13	1	1	—	—
Others	1	2	3	2	3	1
Secular canons	6	6	3	16	8	2
Totals	45	80	9	23	11	3

A very interesting light is thrown on the general history of castles in the medieval period by looking at the monasteries associated with them.[5] Throughout the Middle Ages it was felt desirable for the owner of a castle to found a religious house nearby. This was often done at the time of the foundation of the castle, or sometimes by the founder's widow, or sometimes long afterwards. It was not obligatory and by no means all castles had them. The house by its prayers provided intercession for the souls of the founder and his successors, while it could furnish a burial place for the family, as well as providing other services. The table above sets out 170 cases where such a relationship between castle and religious foundation seems to have existed (it is almost certainly incomplete).

As might be expected the great period of foundation was during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when the majority of parent (and other) castles were also founded. At that time a good many of the new houses (Cluniac and Alien) were dependencies of foreign monasteries which no doubt led to the introduction of many compatriot monks of the Norman castle-builders. A favoured method of foundation was indeed to give the parish church, or sometimes a piece of land, to a monastery at home or abroad and leave it to the house to set up and maintain a 'cell' of the mother house. In the twelfth century, foundations by the new orders, Augustinian, Cistercian and Premonstratensian, were the order of the day, the black canons (Augustinians), being ordained priests and so able to take services in the castle chapel, being particularly popular. From the point of view of the subject of this book, however, it is the striking changes that took place in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries that deserve special attention.

The remarkable fall in the total number of foundations in the thirteenth century reflects in part a falling-off in monastic foundation as a whole, if we exclude friaries, the mendicants not being very suitable associates for
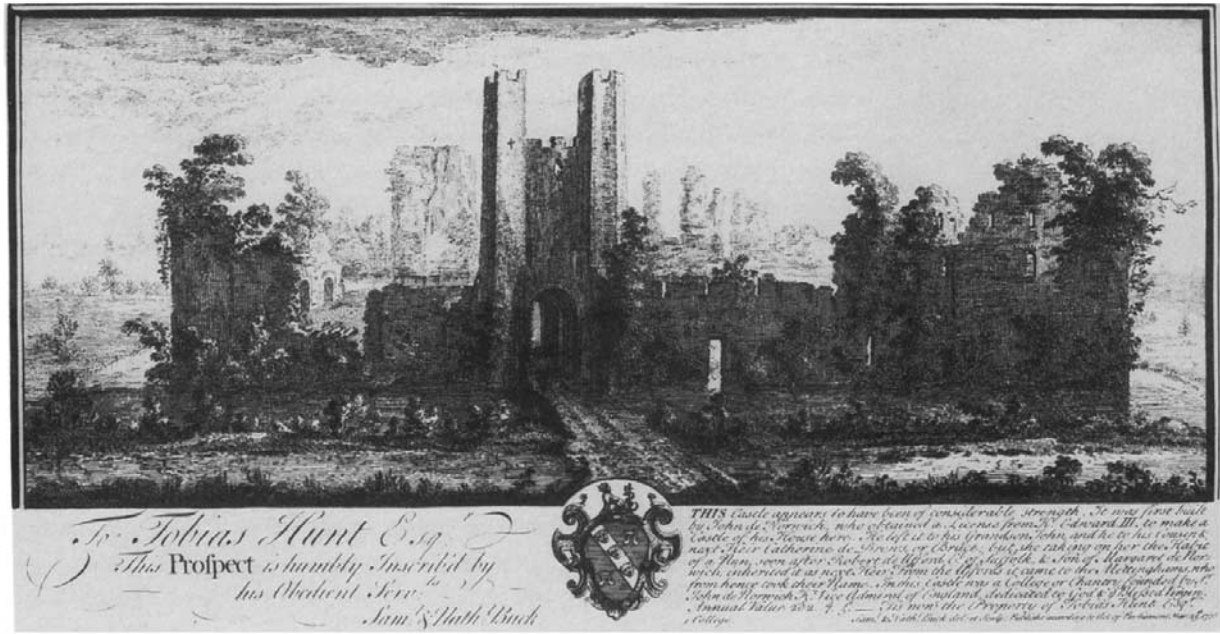
a castle. Nevertheless, even without supporting figures, for the reasons given above, it may be suspected that there was a dramatic fall in castle foundations in the thirteenth century, although there must be caution in using the table to support this view since during this century, castle foundation without an accompanying monastery seems to have been more common. Wales offers the most impressive evidence of this; in the eleventh and twelfth century, castles (Chepstow, Monmouth, Carmarthen etc.) had associated monasteries, but the dozen or so castles founded or rebuilt by Edward I in the conquest did not.

The fourteenth century saw an increase in the number of monastic foundations, and, as we shall see, there may also have been an increase in the number of castle foundations (in England, not in Wales) at this time. The characteristic religious foundation of this period was the college of secular canons, very often attached to the parish church which was sometimes rebuilt at the same time. The canons were celibate priests living in a community but not by a regular rule like the 'regular' monks and canons. The constitution and the physical appearance of their buildings very much resembled that of a college at Oxford or Cambridge surviving from that period. There were a master and fellows, the latter living in cellular lodgings arranged around a court, a plan analogous to that of the large house of the period (as at Oxford or Cambridge) and not connected with the monastic plan. There was an educational aspect to their work (there were boy choristers) but prayers of intercession on behalf of the founder played an important part. The recital of benefactors on the Founder's Day at a Cambridge college most closely reproduces the atmosphere of such an institution. In the rivalry between castle and courtyard house that we shall be describing it is well to remember that in these religious foundations of the castle-builders the traditional medieval monastic plan had already been discarded.

There were Arthurian overtones in the chapel and associated college founded in Windsor Castle by Edward III, who created the new knightly Order of the Garter, and there may well have been an element of deliberate archaism in other foundations. It was a matter of status: the authentic castle required a religious house to accompany it. One feels this at Tattershall, Lincolnshire, although the actual creation of the college and reconstruction of the parish church were carried out by the castle-builder's executor. At Thornbury, Gloucestershire, a large college was planned just a few years before the Reformation, no doubt to confer suitable status on the splendid 'castle' (if we may use this term) then licensed and being built by the unfortunate Duke of Buckingham at the time of his execution in 1522.

5 View in 1728 of ruins of Mettingham Castle, founded as a castle in the fourteenth century but later taken over by a college of secular canons.

Unhappily, very few of the buildings of such colleges survive, since, like the monasteries, they were formally dissolved by statute. The best example is at Windsor Castle with its great chapel and cellular lodgings built for the canons by Edward IV. At Mettingham in Suffolk the castle and college were founded by Sir John de Norwich in the middle of the fourteenth century, but subsequently the college was moved into the abandoned castle, an unusual turn of events. The gatehouse and few fragments that survive belong to the castle rather than the college (fig. 5).

The fortunes of a particular castle were of course bound up with the family history of its owners. No two were alike and even when we know the family tree this does not mean the castle experienced the same vicissitudes, particularly if it was held in plurality. The lack of male heirs with the division of the estate among daughters could (then as now) have serious consequences. Richard's Castle on the borders of Hereford-shire and Shropshire traces its history back to the pre-Conquest period and its position on the Welsh border ensured it a lively history in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[6] In the fourteenth century it appears to have been in full vigour with some kind of attached borough, but the lack of male heirs caused division of the property among four daughters. What was a misfortune in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries could be a disaster in the contracting society of the later Middle Ages; by the time of