

Classroom VIDEO

Teacher's Notes

KNIGHTS AND CASTLES



Duration: 29 min

Years: 5-10

KNIGHTS AND CASTLES

INTRODUCTION

This video film on Knights and Castles examines a fascinating aspect of life in the Middle Ages. An examination is made of the structure and purpose of castles, castle life, knighthood, combat and armour, warfare and the demise of castles. Castles are not something that are peculiar to England, Wales and Scotland, but could be found over many parts of Europe. Castles were a residence as well as a stronghold, and provided a place where people were safe from attack. Castles were often built to defend vital places such as a town, a port, a border or to defend a place already won in battle.

DEVELOPMENT OF CASTLES

One of the earliest forms of castles was the **Motte and Bailey Castle**. They consisted of a motte, a natural or artificial mound of earth on which a wooden tower or **Keep** was built. Many mottes were over ten metres high and were surrounded by a moat or ditch. The motte was connected to an outer courtyard called a bailey, protected by its own moat or bank and surrounded by a high wooden fence. These castles were fairly easy to capture or set alight as they were made of wood. **Square stone Keeps** were later built. These were sometimes over 35 metres high. Because of their size and weight, these were built on flat ground or natural hills. A typical stone keep had three floors and a basement. The basement was used for stores and prisoners, the soldiers lived on the first floor, the Great Hall and the Lord's solar were on the second floor and the sleeping rooms for the Lord and his family were on the third floor. A chapel was often inside the keep. Windows were thin slits, wide enough to fire arrows through and let in light. Spiral staircases were in the corner turrets.

later additions made for greater defence included:

A **plinth** or rectangular slab of stone at the bottom of walls.

A strong wall called a **curtain** around the keep.

A **gatehouse** built in the curtain wall.

A **portcullis** or thick metal grill, which could be lowered to protect the doorway into the castle.

Circular or multiangular towers or keeps to avoid blind spots.

A **drawbridge** and **moat**.

Concentric castles without a central keep.

A **barbican** to protect the gatehouse.

ISSUES AND ACTIVITIES

1. Explain the advantages and disadvantages of motte and bailey castles and stone castles.
2. Draw a plan of a castle, incorporating many of the features outlined in the video and notes.
3. Write down a list of reasons why castles were needed.
4. List the defensive features of fourteenth century castles and explain how each of these features made castles difficult to attack. Why is the actual site so important?
5. **Research:** Investigate the location, features and history of any castle in England or Wales.

THE CASTLE BUILDERS

When studying knights and castles, the skill and methods of the actual builders are often overlooked.

The designers and builders of castles did not have the advantages of the technology that we have today, such as power driven machinery and computers. Clay, wood and stone were the most common building materials. Metals such as iron and lead were only available in small quantities. Shaping and transporting heavy stones was a time consuming and expensive task. Walls had to be strong and built so that they didn't collapse or sink in the ground.

Builders often used stone rubble in between the walls, so that sides of the walls could move independently if the foundations had faults. Lime mortar was also used between the bricks, to prevent grinding and splintering and to make the wall stronger. There was also much skill in building arches and putting the key stone into place. The video examines some of the simple machines used, such as pulleys and cranes that operated by having a man walking inside a treadmill. The use of scaffolding can be evidenced from some of the structures remaining today. It should also be mentioned that the building of a castle could take hundreds of men working for ten or even twenty years.

ISSUES AND ACTIVITIES

1. Outline some of the differences in building techniques between medieval times and today.
What skills would be required by medieval craftsman such as stone masons?
2. Describe how the different building equipment mentioned in the video film was used.
3. Discussion: Why did it take so long to build a castle? What were the main obstacles?
4. **Research** : List the names and uses of a variety of the tools and building aids used by workman in medieval times.

CASTLE LIFE

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The people inside the castle were organised like those in a small town or village. The most important people in a castle were the lord or baron and his family. Under his command were his knights. These may have varied from as few as a dozen to as many as fifty.
Next in importance after the baron was his steward. He acted as the lord's deputy and as well as supervising the smooth running of the castle, was in charge of finances, appointing officials such as valets and Reeves, and fixing rents. There were many other people involved in castle

life such as the chaplain, falconers, stable hands, cooks, smiths, carpenters and masons. The armourer was also important not just in making weapons and armour but looking after them and their repair. These were kept free of rust by cleaning them with salt and vinegar. Women also played an important role in castle life, collecting and preparing food, making clothing, preparing medicines from herbs and filling in for men in when they were fighting. Women married at a young age and often had eight to ten children, many of whom generally died before they reached the age of two.

SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS

The baron and his family and special guests were the only people who slept off the floor on wooden frame beds filled with straw. The bed was surrounded by curtains giving some privacy and protection from draughts. Most people slept on pallets on the floor which could be rolled up out of the way in the day. Visitors to the castle, such as merchants, would often stay in tents within the castle walls. Most of the household slept in their day clothes.

Toilets or garderobes were few in number and were usually holes built into the castle walls. These were often foul smelling and unhygienic.

FOOD AND COOKING

In early castles food was prepared in a wooden hut in the courtyard, later castles had kitchens. The head chef in the larger castles was very important and preparing meals for those in the castle was a major task. Much of the meat was roasted on metal rods called spits above the kitchen fire or open hearth. Large bronze cooking pots called skillets were also widely used. Bread was baked in an oven near the open hearth. Ale was also brewed.

Preserving food, especially meat, was a problem as there were no forms of refrigeration. Drying, salting or pickling food were the main methods used. Sheep and pigs were kept for meat; chicken, swans and geese were reared for meat and eggs; cows and goats provided milk; oats, barley and wheat were grown outside the castle, as were apples, plums and pears. Many vegetables were available such as white carrots, parsnips, swedes, cauliflowers, broccoli, cabbages and marrows.

BANQUETS

The centre of life in the castle was the Great Hall. Banquets were held on special occasions such as those following a knighthood. The preparation of food for banquets could last for days.

Only the baron, his wife and guests had chairs. They were arranged around a raised table. Banquets often began in the late afternoon and lasted for hours, with dishes for each course. The baron, his family and guests ate their food off pewter, silver and sometimes gold plates. They also used knives and spoons but no forks. Most people ate with their fingers, throwing their scraps onto the floor for the dogs.

Generally food was served on slabs of bread called trenchers. The high table drank fine French wines or ales out of pewter goblets. Those on the lower tables drank ale from clay mugs.
The dishes served at such banquets would often include the following:

Chicken and squirrel broth, salmon with orange, trout with spices, sugared mackerel, roasted swan, roasted venison, boar's head with brown roast beef with chopped herbs, blancmange (a savoury dish), stuffed quarter of bear, fig pudding, apple dumpling and cakes with honey and roasted chestnuts.

ISSUES AND ACTIVITIES

1. Make a list of the various activities that occurred within the castle walls.
2. What methods does the video film suggest were used by the inhabitants of castles to keep warm at night?
3. Write a menu for a medieval banquet. Make sure you include a wide variety of food and a large number of courses.
4. What indication do you gain from the video of the role women played in castle life? How did they contribute to the treatment of injuries and illnesses?
5. **Research** : Attitudes to cleanliness and methods of bathing.
6. Draw and label a plan of the buildings within the castle and their uses.

KNIGHTS AND ARMOUR

The common image of knights portrays them as being strong, brave fighters and skilled horsemen. They were supposed to follow the laws of chivalry. This meant they were to support the Church, defend the weak and protect women. Evidence showed that many failed to live up to these expectations.

BECOMING A KNIGHT

It required fourteen years training to become a knight. At the age of seven a boy of noble birth, was usually sent to a nobleman's household to be a page. Here he was given education, taught appropriate behaviour and how to ride a horse. When he was fourteen he was apprenticed to a knight whom he served as a squire. Over the next seven years he was taught how to handle weapons and look after his master's armour and horses. He even went into battle with the knight. Successful squires were knighted when they were around twenty one years old.

Before the ceremony in which he was to be knighted, the squire bathed to wash away his sins. He then dressed in a white tunic indicating purity and a red robe indicating he was ready to be wounded in god's service. Next he went without food for twenty four hours and spent the night praying. At dawn he went to the chapel where he confessed his sins. A squire then helped him with his armour. He was then given his spurs and the priest blessed his sword as the squire promised to be brave and loyal and to protect the poor and weak. The Lord finally strikes him on the shoulder with the sword and the squire becomes a knight.

ARMOUR

The main body armour worn by early knights was made of mail. In the fourteenth century, knights increasingly added steel plates to protect their limbs and the body was protected further with a coat-of-plates, made of pieces of iron attached to a cloth covering. Knights also wore metal shin guards as well as mail leggings. Helmets varied greatly from the Basinet type to the more open faced variety which allowed for less protection but greater vision. By about 1400 some knights wore full sets of plate armour.

Armour was very expensive. Some armours were painted black, both to preserve the metal and as a decoration.

Knights were identified by symbols on a shield or a full coat-of-arms. This enabled opponents to identify the knight. This system of identification was known as heraldry and was based on strict rules. The knight's coat-of-arms was passed on to the eldest son when he died. Other children used variants of their father's arms.

TOURNAMENTS AND JOUSTS

From time to time, tournaments and jousts were held to improve military training or to celebrate a special event. The area where the competition took place was called the lists. The events consisted of tourney in which two armies fought against each other, duels with different types of weapons, or jousts when two knights on horseback charged at each with long lances and tried to dismount each other. Between each of the mounted knight was a wooden barrier called a tilt, which stopped the horses crashing into each other. It was usual for lances to be shattered and if those of both knights were broken, they often dismounted and continued the duel with swords. Young squires training for such events, practised riding at a quintain, a target with a weight attached, which would swing and hit a rider who did not move out of the way quickly enough.

ISSUES AND ACTIVITIES

1. Explain the term chivalry and outline the Knights Code of Chivalry.
2. Describe the stages of training leading to knighthood. What was the significance of the preparations immediately prior to knighthood?
3. Design a coat-of-arms that would be suitable for a knight.
4. Outline some of the developments in armour during medieval times.
5. Imagine you are a witness at a jousting competition between two knights. Describe the atmosphere and activity at the tournament and comment on the nature of the duel between the knights.
6. **Research:** What evidence can you find for suggesting that the people in medieval Britain were religious?

THE CASTLE AT WAR

At the beginning of the Middle Ages a castle could be attacked by men with cross bows, swords, long bows and pikes. By the end of this period small cannons, catapults hurling rocks and other methods were used. As attackers came up with new ideas, castle builders had to come up with defences to counter these methods.

METHODS USED BY ATTACKERS

1 Starving into submission

If a castle was not well supplied with food and water, it was simply a matter for those besieging a castle to just wait. Sooner or later the defenders would starve or surrender, providing the besiegers did not give up from boredom or for some other reason first.

2 Battering Ram

This was an iron tipped log on a structure with wheels and a protective covering. When it was placed against the castle gate or wall, the log was swung backwards and forwards, creating considerable destructive power.

3 Catapults

There were a number of variations of the catapult, but the main aim was to hurl boulders within the castle walls or at the castle walls.

4 The Trebucket

This was a form of catapult with a large weight in front. The enormous sling was used to hurl boulders with great force. Many could hurl boulders of about 90 kilograms up to 300 metres.

5 Sapping

This involved loosening several outer stones on the castle wall, then digging out the rubble and shoring up the wall with props. Wood covered with lard was piled in the hole and set alight, often causing part of the wall to collapse.

6 Belfry or siege tower

These consisted of an attacking platform. Once it was placed against the wall of the castle, the attackers would scale the ladders to reach the platform. As well as allowing the attackers to fight the defenders on the battlements, rotting carcasses could be thrown into the castle to spread disease.

CREDITS

Narrator

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Directed, Filmed and Edited by

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Animation

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Executive Producer

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Teachers Notes

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ISSUES AND ACTIVITIES

1. Outline the changing defence systems used by castle designers to counter the new ideas and methods developed by attackers.
 2. Describe and draw the type of siege weapons shown in the video film.
 3. Select any five of the methods used by those attacking a castle and write the advantages and disadvantages of each method.
 4. Imagine you were living in a castle under attack. Describe the nature of the conflict using a diary format.
 5. **Research** the development and impact of cannons in medieval times.
- By the end of the fifteenth century, siege warfare involving castles declined as gunpowder had been invented and castle walls could be more easily breached. Conflicts now tended to be settled on the open battlefield. However traditional castles had not outlived their usefulness and continued to be used effectively for the next few hundred years.

The Mangonel

7 This was another form of catapult. It was used to throw large quantities of small stones, burning material and rotting carcasses over the walls.

The Ballista

8 Siege bows or ballistas were large crossbows often on a frame with wheels which shot oversized arrows or spears over fifty metres. The large bow arm had to be winched back. These were very effective against infantry or cavalry sent out from the castle.

Mantlets

9 These were transportable screens from which archers and cross bowmen could fire at the enemy without getting hit themselves.

DEFENCE OF CASTLES

Castles were strongly built with curtain walls and battlements and used many devices to defend themselves against attack. Moats were deep and not easily crossed. When the drawbridge was raised and the portcullis lowered entry to the castle was very difficult. The barbican and gatehouse were well defended with machicolations or murder holes through which arrows could be fired or boiling oil dropped on attackers, and with holes in the walls through which pikes could be thrust.

Castle walls were difficult to scale and provided cover for those inside the castle. Arrow slits for cross bows and long bows, catapults for hurling projectiles at attackers and hoardings for throwing down such things as boiling oil and boiling water on attackers, were an effective defensive system.

To counter attempts to tunnel under castle walls, defenders dug into these tunnels and flooded them. Hooks could also be lowered to immobilise battering rams and scaling ladders could be pushed away from walls.