

= Beeston Castle =

Beeston Castle is a former Royal castle in Beeston , Cheshire , England ( grid reference SJ537593 ) , perched on a rocky sandstone crag 350 feet ( 107 m ) above the Cheshire Plain . It was built in the 1220s by Ranulf de Blondesville , 6th Earl of Chester , ( 1170 ? 1232 ) , on his return from the Crusades . In 1237 , Henry III took over the ownership of Beeston , and it was kept in good repair until the 16th century , when it was considered to be of no further military use , although it was pressed into service again in 1643 , during the English Civil War . The castle was slighted ( partly demolished ) in 1646 , in accordance with Cromwell 's destruction order , to prevent its further use as a stronghold . During the 18th century the site was used as a quarry .

It is rumoured that treasure belonging to Richard II lies undiscovered in the castle grounds , but the many searches that have been carried out have failed to find any trace of it . The castle is now in ruins . The walls of the outer bailey , and the walls , gatehouse of the inner bailey are separately recorded in the National Heritage List for England as designated Grade I listed buildings . The castle is also a Scheduled Ancient Monument , owned by English Heritage .

= = Prehistory = =

Beeston crag is one of a chain of rocky hills stretching across the Cheshire Plain . Pits dating from the 4th millennium BC indicate the site of Beeston Castle may have been inhabited or used as a communal gathering place during the Neolithic period . Archaeologists have discovered Neolithic flint arrow heads on the crag , as well as the remains of a Bronze Age community , and of an Iron Age hill fort . The rampart associated with the Bronze Age activity on the crag has been dated to around 1270 ? 830 BC ; seven circular buildings were identified as being either late Bronze Age or early Iron Age in origin . It may have been a specialist metalworking site .

= = Design = =

Beeston was built by Ranulf de Blondesville , 6th Earl of Chester , as an impregnable stronghold and a symbol of power . The siting of the castle 's outer bailey walls was chosen to take advantage of the fortifications remaining from the earlier Iron Age rampart . In medieval documents the castle is described as Castellum de Rupe , the Castle on the Rock . It is one of three major castles built by Ranulph in the 1220s , shortly after his return from the Fifth Crusade . The others are Bolingbroke in Lincolnshire , and Chartley , Staffordshire , both of which share similar architectural features with Beeston ; in particular the design of the towers .

Unlike many other castles of the period , Beeston does not have a keep as its last line of defence . Instead the natural features of the land together with massive walls , strong gatehouses , and carefully positioned towers made the baileys themselves the stronghold . The defences consisted of two parts . Firstly , a rectangular castle on the summit of the hill , with a sheer drop on three sides and a defensive ditch up to 30 feet ( 9 m ) deep in places cut into the rock on the fourth side . Secondly , an outer bailey was built on the lower slopes , with a massive gatehouse protected by a 16 feet ( 5 m ) wide and 10 feet ( 3 m ) deep ditch .

The outer bailey was roughly rectangular , with 6 feet ( 2 m ) thick walls faced in sandstone and infilled with rubble . The walls , parts of which still remain , contain a number of D @-@ shaped towers , an innovation in English castles at that time . The towers allowed defenders to fire across the walls as well as forwards , and their open @-@ backed design meant that they would not offer cover to any attackers who gained access to the outer bailey . The inner bailey was situated on the rocky summit at the western end of the crag .

To provide the castle 's inhabitants with a supply of fresh water two wells were dug into the rock , one of them , at 370 feet ( 113 m ) deep , one of the deepest castle wells in England .

= = Royal castle = =

Although most of the defences were in place by the time of Ranulph 's death in 1232 , there were no living quarters , and neither were there on the death of Ranulph 's successor John in 1237 . John died without a male heir , allowing King Henry III to take over the Earldom of Cheshire . Henry enlarged Beeston Castle during his wars with Wales , and used it as a prison for his Welsh captives . No attempt was made to equip the castle as a permanent residence with halls and chambers ; garrisons were probably housed in wooden structures within the outer bailey .

In 1254 Henry gave Beeston , together with other lands in Cheshire , to his son Prince Edward . He also gave the title Earl of Chester to the prince , a title that has been conferred on the heir to the throne of England ever since . Edward was crowned king of England in 1272 , and completed the conquest of Wales .

In the middle of the 14th century there are references to men of Cheshire who were made constables of the royal castle . The constable would probably have lived in or near the gatehouse . The habitation was described in an account of the castle in 1593 by Samson Erdeswick , which describes , " a goodly strong gatehouse , and strong wall with other buildings , which when they flourished were a convenient habitation for any great personage . "

Beeston was kept in good repair and improved during Edward 's reign , and throughout the 14th century . However , by the 16th century , the castle was considered to be of no further use to the English Crown , and in 1602 it was sold to Sir Hugh Beeston ( c . 1547 ? 1626 ) of Beeston Hall .

There have been persistent rumours of a treasure hidden by Richard II somewhere in the castle grounds . Richard is supposed to have hidden part of his personal wealth at Beeston on his journey to Chester in 1399 , before boarding a ship to Ireland to suppress a rebellion there . On his return , Richard was deposed by Henry , Duke of Lancaster , the future Henry IV , and his treasure is said to have remained undiscovered . Many searches have been carried out , most of them focusing on the deep well in the inner bailey , but nothing has ever been found . The rumour of hidden treasure may not be well @-@ founded , as Henry IV is recorded as having recovered Richard 's gold and jewellery from its various hiding places .

= = Civil war = =

During the English Civil War many neglected castles were pressed into service . Beeston was seized on 20 February 1643 by Parliamentary forces commanded by Sir William Brereton . The walls were repaired and the motte was cleaned out . During 1643 part of the royal army of Ireland landed at Chester . On 13 December 1643 Captain Thomas Sandford and eight soldiers from that army crept into Beeston at night ( possibly aided by treachery ) and surprised the castle governor , Captain Thomas Steele , who was so shaken by the event that he surrendered on the promise that he would be allowed to march out of the castle with honours . Steele was tried and shot for his failure to hold the castle .

The Royalists survived a siege by parliamentary forces from November 1644 until November 1645 , when their lack of food forced them to surrender . The castle was partially demolished in 1646 , to prevent its further use as a stronghold .

= = Later history = =

Quarrying was carried out in the castle grounds during the 18th century , and the gatehouse leading into the outer bailey was demolished to build a track for the stones to be removed from the site . In 1840 the castle was purchased by John Tollemache , 1st Baron Tollemache , at that time the largest landowner in Cheshire , as part of a larger estate . In the mid @-@ 19th century the castle was the site of an annual two @-@ day fete , raising money for local widows and orphans and attracting more than 3000 visitors a day .

= = Present day = =

The castle is owned by English Heritage , and although in ruins , enough of the walls and towers

are still in place to provide a clear picture of how it would have looked in its prime . It is open to visitors and has a small museum and visitor 's centre . A lodge house was built by Tollemache in the 19th century , and was expanded in the 20th century . The lodge is two storeys high , with two circular towers either side of a central archway . It is designated as a Grade II listed building .

Beeston offers one of the most spectacular views of any castle in England , stretching across eight counties from the Pennines in the east to the Welsh mountains in the west .