

PONTEFRACT CASTLE

A tourist's guide to interesting archaeological sites in West Yorkshire



[A view across the bailey at Pontefract Castle. The remains of the keep can be seen above the castle mound.]

History

After the Norman Conquest the manor of Pontefract was given to Ilbert do Lacy as part of a vast landholding which became known as the honour of Pontefract. It was owned by the de Lacy family until 1311 when it passed to Thomas of Lancaster. The castle was confiscated by the king after the rebellion and subsequent execution of Thomas in 1314. It was returned to Henry of Lancaster (Thomas' brother) in 1327, but again became a royal possession when Henry Bolingbroke, heir to the Lancaster estates, was crowned king after his usurpation of Richard II in 1399. The castle has remained a Crown possession ever since.

Given the importance of the castle and its owners it is not surprising that it has witnessed some of the major events of northern history. Thomas of Lancaster was beheaded on a small hill outside the castle walls. Richard II died a prisoner in the castle in what can only be described as suspicious circumstances. In 1536 the castle was temporarily taken over by the Pilgrimage of Grace, a northern rebellion against the rule of Henry VIII. The castle was besieged three times

during the English Civil War and was the last stronghold in England to hold out for the King.

The castle was demolished in 1649. By the 1700s the castle grounds had been turned over to the growing of liquorice. In the 1800s the castle became a park and recreation ground. The site is now administered by Wakefield MDC.

The Remains

The most striking feature of the site is the impressive keep which was built in the early 13th century. It consists of three conjoined drum towers. Military historians have sometimes thought that there ought to be a fourth tower on the inner side to make the structure symmetrical. This would give it a similar appearance to Clifford's Tower in York. However the Tudor antiquarian John Leland mentions six, so perhaps the missing inner face had three smaller towers crammed together.

Also of interest is the powder magazine reached by steps down from the bailey. During the Civil War it was used as a prison and the walls are covered with graffiti carved by the men imprisoned there.

Other features that are still visible include part of the curtain wall with a sally port, the kitchens and the bases of some of the towers.

Parts of the castle were excavated between 1982 and 1986. See *Pontefract Castle: Archaeological Excavation 1982-86*, West Yorkshire Archaeological Service, 2002.

This guide was written by Dave Weldrake (© WYAAS 2010)

More information on the WYAAS website

[Pontefract Castle](#)
[Pilgrimage of Grace](#)

External Links

[Pastscape](#) features detailed information on the site from English Heritage.

[Twixt Aire and Calder](#) Wakefield's image archive, has many old pictures and drawings of Pontefract Castle.

Location

To the east of the town centre at SE 4606 2936 For map [click here](#).

Access

Pontefract Castle is now a public park with a wide level path around the bailey with steps giving access to other parts of the castle.

Wakefield MDC offers regular tours of the magazine/powder store. Full details can be found on the [council website](#)

NB: There is more information about Pontefract Castle and other historic sites in West Yorkshire held within the West Yorkshire Historic Environment Record (HER), Contact us via 01924 306797 or wyher@wyjs.org.uk. Alternatively search our records online via the Heritage Gateway website - www.heritagegateway.org.uk