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*Windsor Castle:
The Evolution of an English Fortress and its
21st Century Cultural Significance*

by Leah Stanton

Windsor Castle, the oldest inhabited castle in the world today, has been in operation and continuously occupied by successive monarchs for nearly a thousand years. In its earliest days it was utilized as an English military fortress. However, throughout multiple centuries, its military presence and function has diminished and has evolved into a utilitarian institution as well as cultural icon. This paper will discuss the evolution of Windsor Castle from its beginnings to present time and will answer the question as to whether or not the castle is culturally significant in the 21st century.

A glimpse into the evolution of the castle begins with the death of Edward the Confessor in January of 1066. At the time of his death, there was great dispute regarding who would take the throne. Fifteen years prior, the king had promised the throne to William, the Duke of Normandy. However, on his deathbed, Edward broke his promise to the Norman and instead named his brother-in-law, Harold Godwinson, Earl of Wessex, as King Harold II.¹

William, feeling betrayed, disputed the crowning of Harold as the new king. He gathered his forces and proceeded to cross the English Channel to claim his rightful place upon the throne. Forty weeks after his coronation, on October 14, 1066, the king's forces met the opposing Normans on the battlefield at Hastings.² For many centuries, the number of troops has

¹ Plantagenet Somerset Fry, *The Kings and Queens of England & Scotland* (New York: Dorling Kindersley, 1990), 20.

² *Ibid.*, 20.

been debated, most suggesting the English troops numbered four hundred thousand and the Norman troops numbering eight thousand.³ These troop numbers are artistically depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry which offers several different scenarios regarding their actual numbers. However, modern historians believe a more realistic estimation of seven thousand for each army; of the Norman troops seven thousand, three thousand were mounted troops.⁴ The king lost his life in what would be a victorious battle for William's superior Norman army.⁵ The victory secured William the English crown and the title of "William the Conqueror" on Christmas Day 1066.⁶

Under new rule, William was considered, at times, a patient, tactful, and courageous warrior as well as a ruthless man who also inspired loyalty among his followers and fear among his enemies. He removed landowners and peasants from his newly acquired lands and introduced the feudal system. Always concerned about invasion and rebellion, William rewarded his loyal followers with land and titles, granting them licenses to build castles.⁷ He built a ring of fortresses around his capital for protection. Historian Sir Owen Morshead likened William's fortress ring to that of a clock. He suggested that if London, being the center of the clock and the hour hand as being a distance of twenty-five miles, one could move clockwise from eleven o'clock and find the Berhamsted, twelve o'clock Hertford, three o'clock Rochester, North Downs at Reigate at six o'clock, and completing the defensive ring at nine o'clock is Windsor Castle. Sitting high above the river Thames and exemplifying a superior peripheral defense of the capital and command of the river, Windsor is the only 'ring of fortress' castles that remains intact.⁸ The spot high above the Thames provided protection against the western advancement towards the capital city of London. In addition to its military advantage, the height which the castle was built upon provided magnificent views of the surrounding grounds.

These surrounding grounds consisted of the New Forest which incorporated the royal hunting grounds. A notable amount of villages were removed to build William's New Forest. Peasants were displaced leaving them homeless with no means of hunting for food. As William maintained the sole hunting privileges in the forest he passed laws to prevent trespassing peasants within the forest. By the year 1100, a royal hunting

³ Edd Wheeler, "The Battle of Hastings: Math, Myth and Melee," *Military Affairs* 52, no. 3 (1988): 130-131.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵ Plantagenet, *Kings & Queens*, 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸ Sir Owen Morshead, *Windsor Castle* (London: Phaidon Press, 1957), 5.

lodge had been built near the forest and under King Henry I, more laws were established in 1185 by the grandson of Henry II. These more detailed laws were known as the Assize of Woodstock and were partially enacted to preserve forest resources.⁹ To enforce these laws, he established the forest court system which tried cases in the local forest court. Henry was an excellent record keeper and the forest court records still remain today.¹⁰ Like the addition of the New Forest, other additions and renovations were made to the Castle throughout the centuries which would enhance its infrastructure.

Infrastructure improvements made on the outer walls can be seen today as the walls are in the same position of those that surrounded the original wood-built castle.¹¹ Around the year 1100 Henry I, the first king to call Windsor his royal residence while making his home in the domestic quarters within the castle, began the transformation of the castle into a palace. He built two royal apartments separated within the fortification; both the public and official State residences were built in the Lower Ward. A significant contribution of Henry was that of the replacement of the original timber outer walls with stone. He also rebuilt the original Norman keep as the Round Tower above the motte; projects that continued for the next sixty years before his death in 1179. In the 12th century, King Henry II's grandson, Henry III, completely rebuilt the works of his grandfather in the Lower Ward. He also built a new chapel and formed a planned courtyard with a cloister.¹² Further additions and renovations continued during the reign of Edward III in the 14th century.

Edward was born at Windsor; his reign was from 1327 to 1377. He converted the Windsor military fortress to a gothic palace spending more than any other previous English king had spent on any other single building project. The King's aim was to create a large palace that would encompass both the State Apartments, which were used for official and ceremonial business, and the King's and Queen's private apartments. In 1357 he reconstructed the Upper Ward and later built an inner gatehouse with cylindrical towers on the north side of the Quadrangle. Edward created St.

⁹ John & Ralph Griffiths Cannon, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Monarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 649.

¹⁰ Charles R. Young, "Conversation Policies in the Royal Forests of Medieval England," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 10, no. 2 (1978): 96-97, JSTOR (assessed March 30, 2014).

¹¹ J. & R. Griffiths Cannon, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Monarchy*, 649; Sir Owen Morshead, *Windsor Castle* (London Phaidon Press, 1995), vii.

¹² Royal Collection Trust, "Who Built the Castle," accessed Feb. 4, 2014, <http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/visit/windsorcastle/about/who-built-the-castle>.

George's Hall for the use of the Knights of the Order of the Garter; Britain's highest chivalric honor.¹³ He died in 1377 before his work at Windsor was completed. However, the work was finished during the first six years of Richard II's reign; Edward's grandson and successor. Aside from the modernization of the King's and Queen's apartments and the addition of Edward IV's gallery in the 14th century, these additions and renovations remained unchanged until the 17th century.¹⁴

Since the Kings of the middle ages were extremely focused on converting the castle from a military fortress into a royal residence, they left little major work to be done by the time the Tudors arrived. However, some changes were made by a few of the monarchs between the 15th and 19th centuries. Henry VII built a narrow range west of the State Apartments while his successor, Henry VIII built the gate at the Lower Ward which bears his name. He also built the terrace walk along the north side Upper Ward along the external walls in 1533; the terrace made it convenient for him to observe hunts in the park below. Elizabeth I reigned from 1558 to 1603, and called Windsor her home but found it needed much repair; she embarked on much needed improvements through the 1570s. One project was that of the long gallery which overlooks the North Terrace; it was later incorporated into the Royal Library during the 19th century.¹⁵ With major changes completed in the functionality of the castle, a stylistic shift begins to take place as additions and renovations appear to be more aesthetic and artistic in nature.

A notable interior aesthetic change was made by Charles II when he commissioned Hugh May to modernize the Royal Apartments in the Baroque style. These opulent changes, completed in 1683, included the additions of expensive textiles, new interiors, and brilliant tapestries.¹⁶ George III's renovations included a series of both religious and historical paintings by Benjamin West which depicted English military successes and scenes of religious piety.¹⁷ He also designed the Music Room and the new Dining Room in the Upper Ward. Later in 1796, he appointed James Wyatt as Surveyor General of the Office of Works to transform the exterior of the building into a gothic palace while maintaining the style of the previously renovated State Rooms. Though the renovations of Charles and George were

¹³ Royal Collection Trust, "Royal Residences/Windsor Castle," assessed Feb. 4, 2014, http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/sites/default/files/Windsor_Castle_Fact_Sheet.pdf.

¹⁴ "Who Built the Castle?"

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1997), 23.

mainly interior aesthetic changes, there were notable exterior aesthetic changes when George IV ascended the throne in 1820.¹⁸

George IV, the son of George III, was a collector of art and a builder. He acquired many works of art which are now displayed at Windsor in the Royal Collection Exhibit and his passion for art and pageantry helped Windsor Castle display the ceremonial side of the monarchy.¹⁹ George was aware that Windsor was synonymous with the reputation of the Monarchy, and made exterior aesthetic changes to create a more imposing appearance. He increased the height of the Round Tower and added substantial amounts of stone masonry as well as built new towers and battlements. He also extended St. George's Hall.²⁰ The Bagshot Heath stone, located close in proximity to the castle, ten miles south, was used for the resurfacing. Its composition makeup consists of silicate and crystalline material which washes clean with the rain and does not retain grime, making it difficult to tell its age by appearance.²¹ Many of these changes are visible in the appearance of present-day Windsor Castle.²² He also created the three mile Long Walk leading south from the Castle into the Great Park.²³ He added the Grand Corridor to the Upper Ward when relocating the State Apartments from the Lower to the Upper Ward and he gave the interior a facelift as he built the new grand entrance and staircase; he furnished these all with modern French Empire style furnishings.²⁴ However, his most notable addition was that of the Waterloo Chamber in the 1820s. It contains commissioned portraits by Sir Thomas Lawrence honoring the monarchs, soldiers, and statesmen who were involved in the 1815 defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte.²⁵ The King took up residence when his renovations were completed in the latter part of 1828. His complete, thorough, and costly (nearly £300,000) renovations left little for Queen Victoria to renovate.²⁶

However, Queen Victoria did manage to find projects at Windsor which she could involve herself. She rebuilt the grand staircase and built a new private chapel located at the eastern end of St. George's Hall. In the 1840s she added the Royal Mews and riding school at the south end of the

¹⁸ "Who Built the Castle?"

¹⁹ "Royal Residences / Windsor Castle."

²⁰ "Who Built the Castle?"

²¹ Sir Owen Morshead, *Windsor Castle*, 15.

²² "Royal Residences / Windsor Castle"

²³ Plantagenet Somerset Fry, *The Kings & Queens of England & Scotland*, 64.

²⁴ "Who Built the Castle?"

²⁵ "Royal Residences / Windsor Castle."

²⁶ "Who Built the Castle?"

castle.²⁷ Prince Albert and Queen Victoria devoted their love and time to Windsor. When Prince Albert died in 1861, he was buried at Frogmore, the Windsor Home Park, in a grand mausoleum. Additionally, Victoria was the first monarch to allow public viewing of the State Apartments.²⁸

The shift in functionality of Windsor Castle as a military fortress to that of a royal residence is evident in its additions and renovations. An example of this, aside from the previous additions and renovations by royal residents, is the period in which repairs of the outer walls were well kept for defensive military purposes and later shifted to repairs made for the residences cosmetic appearance. It was then that the outer walls fell into disrepair and were infrequently repaired during residential renovations.²⁹ However, there is more to Windsor Castle than the centuries of additions and renovations made by its royal residents as the shift from fortress to palace occurred and still continues today. It is important to consider the role which Windsor Castle has played in regards to historical and societal events.

After the capture of the Castle during the Civil War battle of Edgehill, Oliver Cromwell used Windsor as his parliamentary headquarters in 1642. The first battle of the war also made Windsor a war time prison.³⁰ In 1648, the castle served as the prison for Charles I until his trial and execution in London; afterwards he was brought back to Windsor for burial in St. George's Chapel.³¹ During times of war as well as the Great Plague in 1665, Windsor became a refuge for the royal family.³² In addition, Windsor also played an important part in both the entertainment of the royal family and its friends. The castle residents also participated in traditional and political functions. One such function is that of the traditional Order of the Garter ceremonies. Founded by Edward III in 1348, the Order was designed to exemplify the legendary King Arthur's Round Table as well as knightly chivalry. The royal family takes part in the yearly Order of the Garter celebration as they lead their fellow knights in a parade through Windsor Castle to a service at St. George's Chapel.³³ Royal Historian Robert Latham translates Samuel Pepys' diary – Pepys wrote in 1669 about his trip to Windsor in which he and his wife were to witness the Garter ceremonies at St. George's Chapel. He described Windsor as a noble place and comments on the robes of the knights and the pretty "show of banners" which were

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "Royal Residences / Windsor Castle."

²⁹ Sir Owen Morshead, *Windsor Castle*, 60.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Royal Residences / Windsor Castle."

³² Matt Rand, "Windsor Castle: A Royal Year," BBC Television, DVD.

³³ Plantagenet Somerset Fry, *The Kids and Queens of England & Scotland*, 66.

hung above the stalls. He also spoke of the dining and entertainment at the castle and its grandness; he stated that Windsor is "...the most romantique [sic] castle that is in this world."³⁴ Moving along to the 20th and 21st centuries, we witness a modern shift towards the cultural use of Windsor Castle.

Because of the anti-German frame of mind of the British people during World War I, George V changed his family name from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, the German name of his father Edward VII and grandfather Prince Albert, to Windsor.³⁵ During World War II, in 1939, both Princess Elizabeth and Margaret were sent to Windsor Castle from Buckingham Palace to protect them from the bombing campaigns in London.³⁶

Windsor Castle never before kept Britain more in touch with its goings-on at the castle until it tapped into the utilization of mainstream social media. It is able to self-promote and stay connected with its thousands of followers on Facebook and Twitter as well as its official government website. One notable success in this media outlet is that it has been reported that between 2010 and 2011, more than one million people visited the castle. In November 1992, hampering visitation, the castle caught on fire. The fire severely damaged and destroyed nearly twenty percent of the State Apartments. It took firefighters nearly fifteen hours and 1.5 million gallons of water to quell the flames. Five years and £37million later, the costly damages were repaired.³⁷ To celebrate the completed repairs, Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh planned a grand banquet with attention paid to every detail. Meticulous attention was especially paid to the banquet table as it was set with 240 place settings with over 900 cutlery and glass wares. The table was decorated with floral arrangements that reached nearly six feet tall; it was customary to see the staff wearing socks while standing on the table to make last minute adjustments to the arrangements. The Royal Chefs, the Pages of the Chamber, and the nearly 300-person Windsor Castle staff prepared for the banquet.³⁸

In the 21st century, we can see that Windsor Castle plays an active role within society and maintains a visible presence in British Culture. In its annual report (2013–2014), the Royal Collection Trust reports that 2.7

³⁴ Robert Latham, *The Illustrated PEPYS: Extracts from the Diary* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1978), 102.

³⁵ Plantagenet Somerset Fry, *The Kids and Queens of England & Scotland*, 195.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ "Royal Residences / Windsor Castle." £37million in 1992 was worth £68.4million in 2014; the US dollar equivalent in 2014 was \$106.7million. (Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, "Five Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a UK Pound Amount, 1270 to Present," *Measuring Worth*, 2015, www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare/.)

³⁸ Rand, "Windsor Castle," BBC.

million people visited Palaces and Galleries in the UK; 38,000 of these were schoolchildren who visited Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle.³⁹ Those numbers will undoubtedly increase with the 2015 commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo and the defeat of Napoleon will be celebrated at the castle with *Waterloo at Windsor: 1815-2015*. The event will combine special State Apartment tours and displays of paintings and artifacts associated with the victorious battle. Additionally, the castle continues its *Family Saturdays* which highlight themed family events; some of which are storytelling, dress-up and arts and crafts workshops. Visitors can also watch the *Changing of the Guard* on various days and times from February through May. Information about events at the castle and the goings-on of its residents can usually be found on the Castle's Facebook or Twitter page.

Windsor Castle has continued its significance among British citizens as it remains a presence within British society as well as the international cultural and social sphere. The Castle maintains a continual participation in historical and cultural traditions, ceremonies, and education.⁴⁰ Additionally, the Castle's commanding presence high upon the River Thames also offers Britain symbolic protection as it still stands guard of the western approach to the capital city of London. Though no longer a fortress by fact, it is still today a fortress by tradition. Windsor Castle is of historical and cultural significance to the British Monarchy and their subjects in the 21st century.

³⁹ The Royal Collection, *Annual Report*, 2014.

⁴⁰ "Royal Residences/Windsor Castle."