



Fig. 1. Tamworth Castle. View across the local authority parkland from the south. River Anker below.

## Tamworth

### 13. Tamworth

From 12th-century documentary evidence it is concluded that the castle was established in the late 11th century by Robert le Despencer. It was given by the Empress Mathilda to William de Beauchamp. In the 13th century, it was held by the Marmions, and in the 15th century by the de Ferrers. The motte is assumed to date from the castle's foundation. An eastern wing-wall (sandstone, herring-bone construction) connecting with the bailey defences ran up the motte and probably linked, originally, to the shell-keep. Since the shell-keep entrance is adjacent, this wing-wall probably protected the original steps up the motte (its fabric later was incorporated in the present pathway). That the shell-keep was still being used in the post-medieval period (below) is testimony to the stability of the structure as a whole, its spacious interior, and its continuing relevance as a suitable location for high-status houses, occupied down to Victorian times. At Tamworth, the shell-keep appears not to have been abandoned in favour of bailey accommodation.

Published views assign the shell-keep wall and its *donjon* tower to one phase of building in the late 12th century, perhaps *circa* 1180. The shell is an irregular polygon (at least 12 faces) with a deep sloping plinth and a spacious interior. Its face is cut through at many places by windows belonging to the various later internal structures. On the north side, the evolution of these windows (which were sometimes bays, but later reduced) has left large portions of masonry protruding from the shell wall. The main entrance to the shell-keep was on the east, immediately south of the *donjon*. This entrance was later incorporated in a grand Tudor entrance with a storeyed porch with loggia (later used as a porter's lodge) which also wraps around the back of the *donjon*. The Tudor work respected the earlier entrance, whose arch may be of 13th-century origin, though this remains uncertain. A smaller, postern entrance (now masked by later masonry) was situated on the north-west side, giving access to the area occupied by the undercroft of the 13th-century northern hall (see below).



Fig. 2. Motte & shell-keep from the south with the highest part of the shell wall (approx. 25ft) remaining.

A stair within the shell-wall, situated left of the main entrance (fig. 28), leads to an intra-mural passage which may originally have run around the entire circuit. Two stretches of it survive, on the south-west and south east. On the south-west stretch, two external loops survive in the mural passage, with four loops above at parapet level (with modern reconstruction work on their inside face but apparently reliable medieval masonry on their exterior) (figs. 17-19). On the south east, the mural passage has a single (partly blocked) external loop. The shell wall shows three phases of masonry: the uppermost part may be 17th or 18th century; the middle part is perhaps a rebuilding followed slighting ordered by King John in 1215; the lowest part is 12th century.

Much of the wall-walk (surviving on the south-east and south-west, but presumably a continuous feature in the original design) and its crenellations seem to have been restored or reconstructed in the 17th-18th

centuries. The shell-keep, whose wall was 7ft (2.1m) thick, was a very defensive structure: a medieval well is known, beneath the 17th-century house on the south side (see below). At the same time, the wall-walk of the shell-keep would have provided views over the castle's nearby extensive parkland.

The virtually-square *donjon*, comprising unlit basement, two storeys above, and roof-top parapet, sits astride the shell wall and has a round-headed, ground-floor entrance on its internal face. It has pilaster buttresses at the angles of its external faces. The *donjon* was originally connected to the shell-keep wall-walk by lateral doors at first-floor level (best preserved where the *donjon* now connects to the servants' chamber above the Tudor porter's lodge). The second- and third-storey chambers lack original internal features, having been reworked (e.g. new fireplaces) in later phases of occupation. Each has a window facing the castle's exterior, overlooking the



*Fig. 3. The approach to the shell-keep and donjon with the path following the line of the assumed original wing-wall steps. The entrance to the interior courtyard is to the left of the three-storey tower and gabled wing.*

wing-wall and its presumed stairs. Both windows are of later date. The uppermost has removed all trace of its predecessor, but the lower one was re-built within its original 12th-century surround. The considerable size of this window (figs. 3, 4) contrasts with the narrowness of the mural loops (see above) on the north-west and south-west, suggesting the shell-keep presented “different faces” to the world in different directions.

Structures surviving within the shell comprise: on the north, a thirteenth-century first-floor hall, or possibly chamber-block, built in stone; in the centre, a fifteenth-century open hall built in timber; on the south, a very fine early 17th-century house built in brick. The (northern) hall/chamber-block is not bonded to the shell-wall and the two are built in different masonry styles. The structure retains a 13th-century doorway to its undercroft, but in the 16th or 17th century its upper storey interior was much altered and a brick porch/stair tower added. Whether the structure succeeded a 12th-century predecessor is not known, so what domestic buildings originally accompanied the *donjon* is not clear. But it occupied the straightest side of the polygonal shell circuit, perhaps indicating a primary building range stood here: a circuit, or part-circuit, of late 12th century timber structures is possible.

Whether the 15th-century great hall was built in a formerly open courtyard, or had a predecessor is also unknown. It was originally a wholly timber structure with wattle and daub panels: its brick walls and large windows are 17th century. A mid 15th-century date for the building is provided by the style of its roof and by dendrochronology. Its northern end was determined by the position of the 13th-century hall/chamber-block. It is now known (from fabric analysis post-dating publication of the timber hall, in Meeson 1983) that at its southern end the 15th-century hall was built against an existing structure, dating from between the 12th and 14th centuries. This may have stood until swept away when the 17th century house was built on the south side. Its location may be represented by the sloping drip-course surviving below wall-walk level on the southern inside face of the shell-wall.

*Internal Diameter:* approx. 90ft x 75ft (27.5m x 23m).

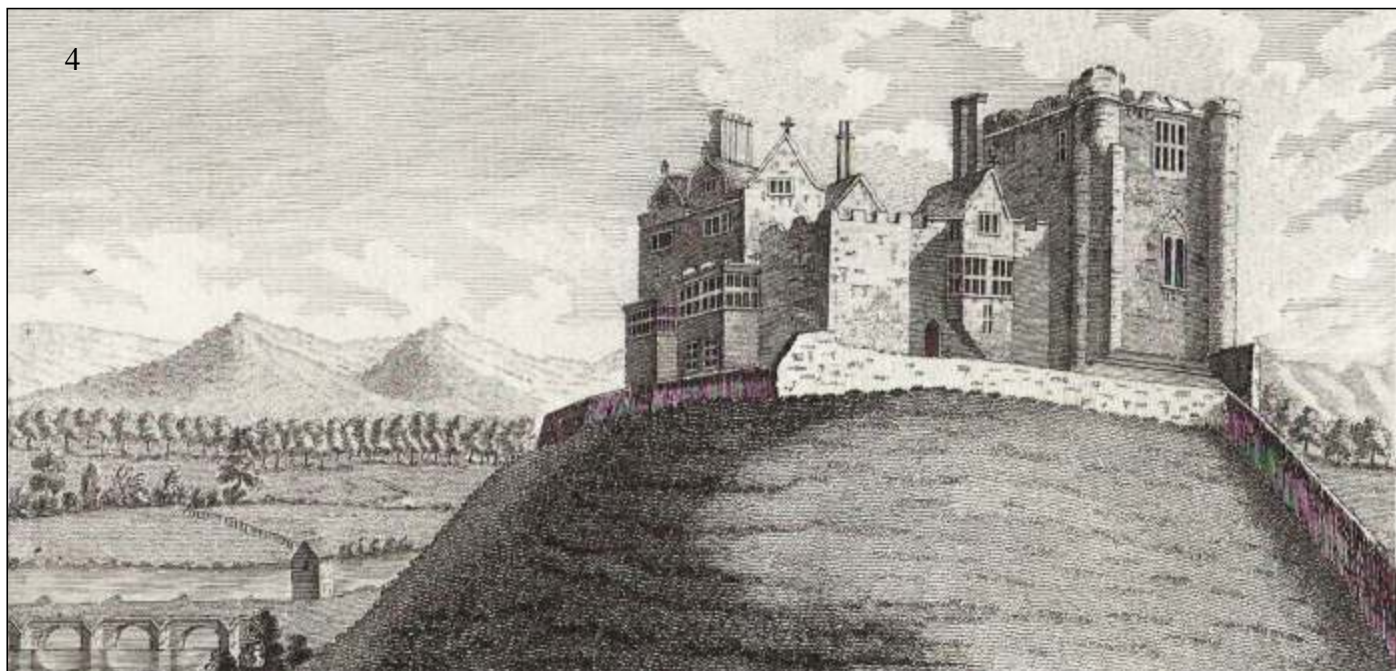
*Shell wall height:* 25ft (7.6m).

*Motte height:* 34ft (10.36m)

*Published refs:* Clark 1884, II, 481-488; Radford 1963; Renn 1968, 319; King 1983, II, 451; Meeson 1983.

*Generous help from Robert Meeson, in refining the above description and giving access to an unpublished Draft Conservation Plan, is acknowledged.*

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*Figs. 4-6. 18<sup>th</sup> century views of the shell-keep, all from the south-east.*

*4. The 1788 print by Richard Godfrey. (Similar to the Buck view below).*

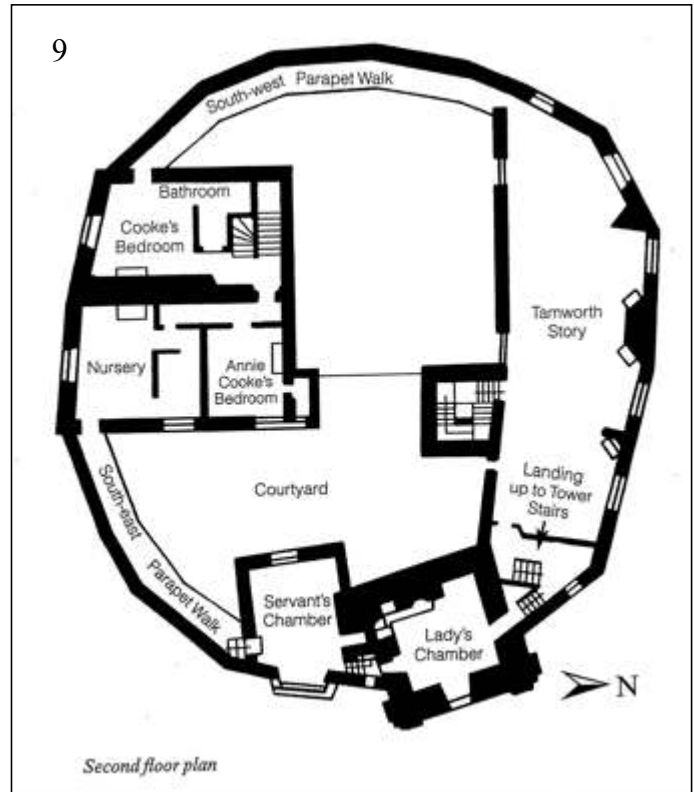
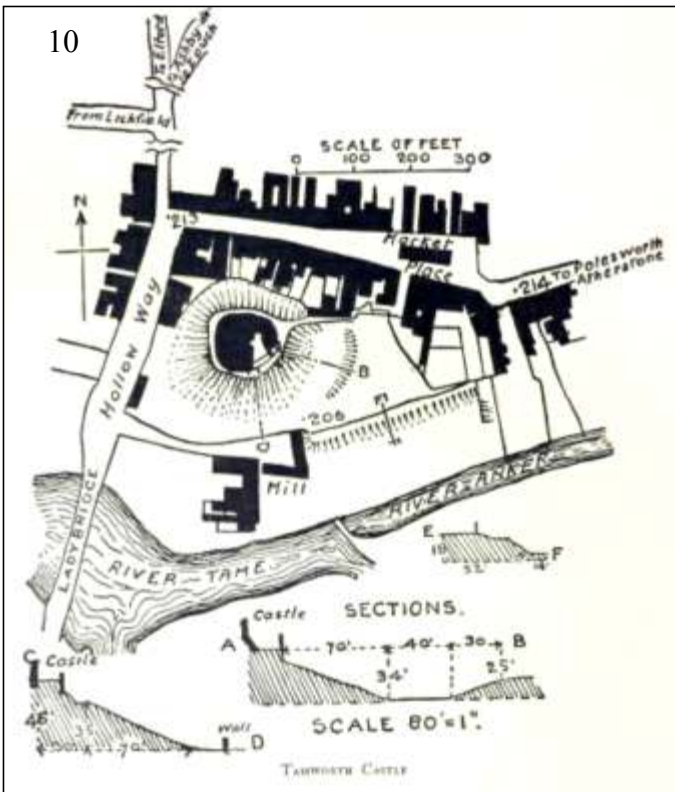
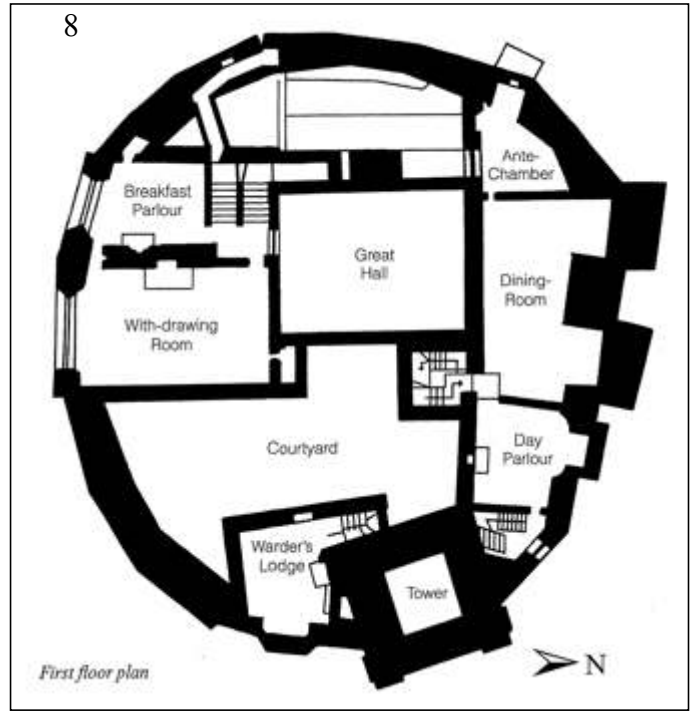
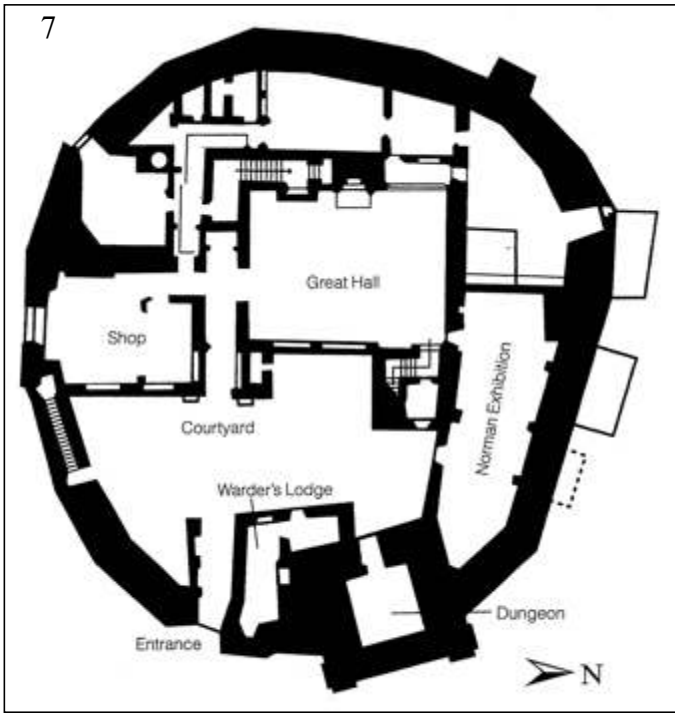
*5. Samuel and Nathaniel Buck, 1729, View from the south-east.*

*6. The south-east view of Tamworth, engraved for the 'Topographer', 1789. (Detail).*

*At that time, Tamworth was in the county of Warwickshire. All depict the first-floor window in the tower as two-light rectangular. The present traceried light appears to be an 19<sup>th</sup> century insertion.*

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Figs. 7-10. Room labels in figs 7-9 are from the current Tamworth A4 Guidebook and the plans are reproduced with kind permission of Tamworth Castle. © Tamworth Castle.

7. **Ground floor plan.** Note mural stairs within the shell-wall to the south blocked when the the wall was reduced in thickness / rebuilt and a window installed. Great Tower basement ('dungeon') chamber unlit.
8. **First floor plan.** Suite of rooms on the north (marked Dining Room etc) may be the site of the original great hall / withdrawing chamber. Note original postern from the 'Antechamber', and further mural gallery in the wall thickness to the west.
9. **Second floor plan.** Wall-walk level with access to the Great Tower north & south 'Lady's Chamber, (a 17<sup>th</sup> century designation) or solar, serviced by the 'Servant's Chamber above the principal entrance.
10. **General ground plan.** From VCH Vol 1. (Lynam, Charles, 1908, 'Ancient Earthworks' in Page, Wm. (ed), VCH Staffordshire Vol. 1 pp. 355-6).



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*Figs. 11-14. 11. ABOVE: Path approach to the keep inside the bailey wing-wall. 12. Detail of the east face of the 1180s? Norman great tower with round-headed inserted neo-gothic window on the second floor. BELOW: 13. The three storey late-Tudor Porter's Lodge building with servant's quarters above. 14. The principal entrance into the shell-keep courtyard. The arch appears to be 13<sup>th</sup> century.*



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*ABOVE: Fig. 15. The south section of the shell wall between the entrance (right) and the early 1600s Jacobean wing (left).*

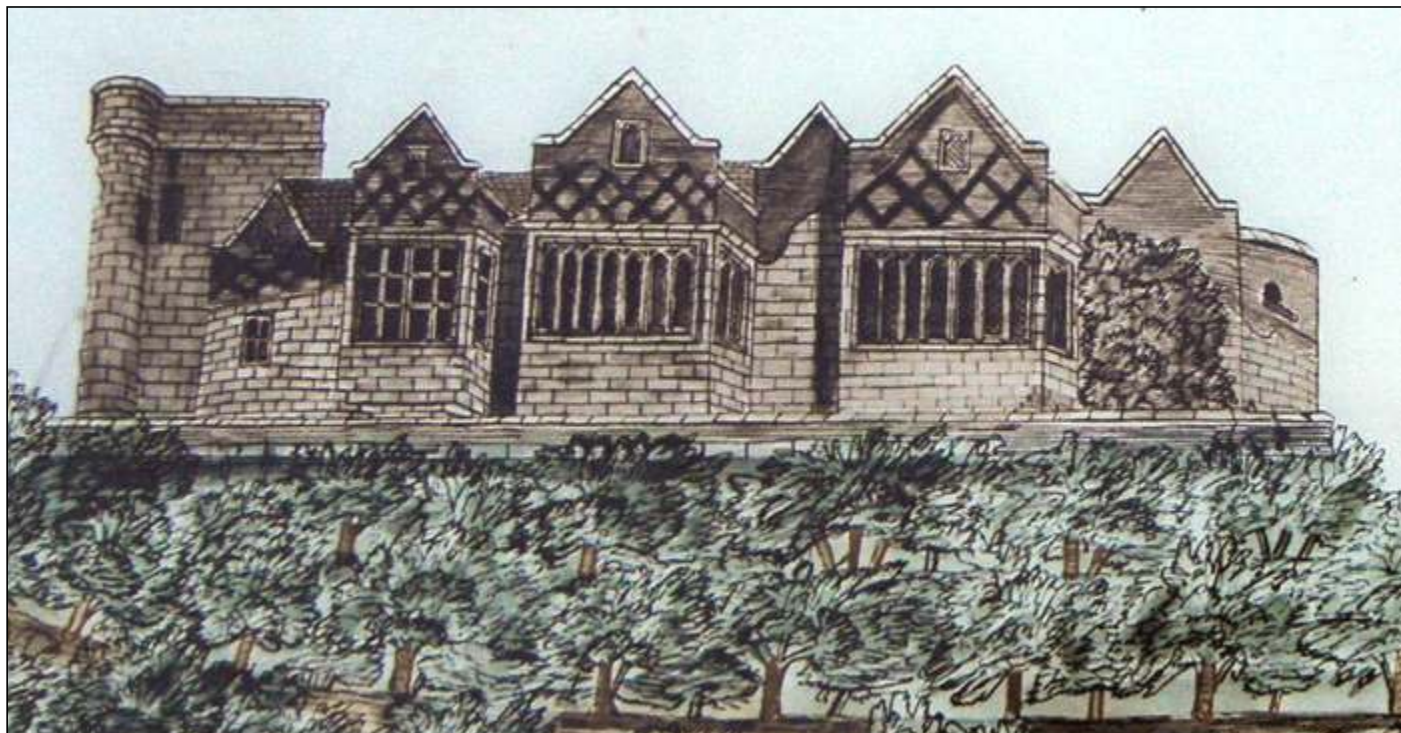
*BELOW: Fig. 16. The south-west section of the shell wall from the Jacobean wing to the walling that contains the intra-mural passage with the small lights to the west. (The south-west parapet walk).*





*Figs. 17-20. All images from along the exterior of the south-west section. 17. Two loops in the oldest section of the shell wall illuminating the intra-mural passageway. 18-19. The single loops above are at parapet level added after the wall was heightened. 20. The blocked postern entrance that leads into the basement below the 'antechamber' on the north-east section.*





ABOVE: Fig. 21. The north side of the shell-keep. The illustration, from an on-site information panel, shows the Tudor bay windows as they looked in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (since dismantled). BELOW: Fig. 22. Left: Remains of the buttresses that supported the bays. Right: Fig. 23. Section where the north wall joints with the tower.





*Fig. 24. The shell-keep courtyard and door leading to the Jacobean wing (left) and the older Great Hall (right). The hall was built in the 1440s but was considerably embellished in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Renaissance door dates to approx 1620. View from the entrance by the Porter's Lodge.*



*Figs. 25-28. Clockwise: 25. The interior (west) side of the great tower from the S-E Parapet Walk. Fig. 26. The donjon or Great Tower from the courtyard. With entrance to the double-height basement (or dungeon per guidebook). In the caption author's view, the tower has been heightened by an extra storey. Fig. 27. The unusually wide door into the Great Tower basement, perhaps mid-13<sup>th</sup> century or later. Fig. 28. Courtyard entry into the intra-mural stairs and passageway (turning right), from the courtyard (the south-east section of walling).*





ABOVE: Fig. 29. The Jacobean staircase that links the north suite (great hall & withdrawing chamber) to the Great Tower both at second (Solar / Lady's Chamber) and third storey. BELOW: Figs. 30 (left), 31. Two views of the door/passage between the tower solar and the Servant's chamber. (Fig. 30 from within the tower).





ABOVE: Fig. 32. Example of the herringbone coursing of the masonry of the wing-wall leading up to the motte.  
BELOW: Fig. 33. The castle from the east. Image taken from the on-site display panel. Image © Bill Blake, Heritage Documentation. Reproduced with thanks.

