

Weoley Castle

There is a line of pre-fabs on Alwold Road in south Birmingham. Still fiercely loved by their inhabitants and in immaculate condition, the homes went up in a matter of days shortly after the war. The building that stands directly behind them took rather longer to complete, and is not in quite such a good state of repair.

By date, Weoley Castle occupies first place in Birmingham's portfolio of community museums. I don't know if it was ever planned as such, but the city owns properties to tell its history from the Middle Ages right through to the 19th Century.

Nevertheless, the castle at Weoley was always the poor relation, compared to the grandeur of Blakesley or Aston Hall or Soho House. For one thing it was foolproof and ruined; and for another it represented a period not covered in the Primary History Curriculum, always a disadvantage when it comes to visitor numbers.

But Weoley Castle is now back on track. Its walls and moat have been restored and safeguarded, there is a new interpretation centre on site, and it has a brand new guidebook to replace the old black-and-white one. It has cost just over £1 million, and grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund and English Heritage, to give Birmingham back its medieval history. The only thing they have not done is put the water back in the moat.

What we have at Weoley is the remains of a medieval moated manor house, one of many moated sites in the south of Birmingham. That moat probably had more to do with status than protection, although, as the dumping ground for all the castle's waste, status came at a smelly price.

Weoley was one of three manors in this neck of Birmingham - Selly and Northfield being the other two - and it brought land for cultivation, a deer park for hunting and resident labour as the perks of feudal ownership. The kinds of rights and responsibilities which came with being an un-free peasant on such a manor are entertainingly outlined by Shena Mason in the new guidebook.

Some of the manorial rolls - records of the six-monthly court of Weoley manor - are preserved in Archives & Heritage in the Central Library. Though a clear declaration of feudal power, the court spent as much of its time dealing with disputes between the tenants as it did asserting its rights.

So what can we see at Weoley today? From the vantage-point by the road we can survey the remains of the house which once stood within the moat, and a surviving survey from 1424 helps to explain what each piece of the jigsaw was for. Inside the towers and battlemented walls of the enclosure were all the elements of the medieval house and home.

Archaeological digs in the 1930s, when the Weoley Castle estate was under construction, and later in the 1950s have provided much in the way of artefacts to illustrate and explain the lives of those who lived within the walls.

The great hall at the far end of the site was the public face of Weoley, where the owners entertained, and the manorial court conducted its proceedings. Entertainment in hall could be musical as well as culinary; one of the digs turned up the wooden drone from a set of medieval bagpipes. Next to the hall, on one side lay the chambers and bedrooms, on the other the kitchen, pantry and buttery, ready to despatch their products to the high table.

Like any medieval castle, Weoley would have brewed its own beer and baked its own loaves, bread and beer being two of life's essentials, however far up or down the social scale one lived. The water came from a well on site, and a garden would have provided herbs for the pot and perhaps vines. Most of the meat and fish too would have come from the castle estate.

A chapel hugged the north wall of the castle. The remains of the base of an altar can still be seen there, and examples of stained-glass from its windows and decorative tiles from its floor have been found in excavations. Status and wealth afforded the luxury of private worship; it was an awful long trudge to Northfield parish church.

Weoley Castle would, of course, have been added to over the centuries. What probably began as a wooden enclosure around 1100 had become one of stone by the following century. And later owners turned a place of defence and security into a comfortable home.

But the rise and fall of a medieval house was often swift. If Weoley was in peak condition in the 15th Century, it was falling down by the middle of the 16th, and a quarry for materials by the 17th. Nearby Stonehouse Farm was one place where some of the spare stone went.

By the 20th Century what was left of Weoley Castle might well have been erased from the map entirely. Only the planning of the housing estate saved it, underscored by the belief that estates need a sense of place and a green heart. And for once we can give the Birmingham planners credit for looking backwards as well as forwards.