



Obituary - Peter Curnow 1927 - 2021



Peter Edwin Curnow 1927 – 2021

Juliet West and John R. Kenyon

For more than thirty years until his retirement in 1987 Peter Curnow served as Inspector of Ancient Monuments, and later as Principal Inspector for London at the Ministry of Works, Department of the Environment and finally English Heritage. He was responsible for providing historical and archaeological advice on the royal palaces, royal parks and Government historic buildings, as well as on guardianship properties and scheduled monuments in London and elsewhere. Despite the range of his knowledge and interests, castles were his particular love and were the subject of his principal published work. He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1963 and was a convivial and respected member of the Society's Essay Club. On his retirement, he was appointed an LVO.

Peter was born in 1927. He was proud of his Cornish ancestry, although his grandfather had settled the family in Hertfordshire and Peter grew up in Hitchin. Schooling at St Christopher's,

Letchworth developed an early passion for history and taught him independence of mind and the importance of critical thinking. He studied for a BSc in Economics at the LSE, interspersed by national service. Life in post-war London allowed him to pursue his interests in architecture and archaeology, including excavation on bomb sites in the City. It was here that he met his wife Elsie ("the management"), with whom he formed a devoted and memorable partnership until her death in 2003. From his first job as deputy curator at the Verulamium Museum at St Albans, he joined the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments at the Ministry of Works in the mid-1950s as assistant to John Charlton, the Inspector for London. This involved advising on some of England's most significant and rewarding monuments and buildings, among them Windsor Castle, the Tower of London, Hampton Court Palace and Osborne House as well as the Palace of Westminster and historic government buildings in Whitehall. Kew Gardens were part of his brief, as were Osterley Park and Ham House, National Trust properties that were at that time maintained for the Trust by the Ministry of Works. The Ministry's own properties in London included the Jewel Tower, Westminster Abbey Chapter House and Chiswick House, while scheduled monuments included the great hall at Eltham Palace and numerous city company halls.

Outside the capital, the London team's advice was sought on historic government buildings including customs houses and military sites with important historic buildings such as Chicksands Priory. Roofed and furnished buildings and historic gardens outside London such as Audley End and Wrest Park were not entrusted to the Inspectorate's prehistorians and medievalists and were known in the office as 'Curnow peculiars', relying as they did on his expertise. Such a broad portfolio played perfectly to Peter's strengths, providing almost limitless scope for the further development of his wide-ranging knowledge and interests, as well as his legendary people-skills. Peter's relaxed and





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friendly manner enabled him to get on famously with those he met at every level and his advice was invariably wise and well-grounded in knowledge and practical experience.

During the early part of his career, Inspectors were encouraged to undertake practical excavation projects across the country, usually during the summer. His work at Richard's Castle in Herefordshire in the 1960s is described below. Peter was also involved with important excavations at the same period at Windsor Castle, during the reconstruction of 10 Downing Street, and with subsequent campaigns in the vicinity of the Treasury, the Cabinet Office and the Westminster Jewel Tower.

In 1970, the Inspectorate became part of the Directorate of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings within the newly formed Department of the Environment and four years later Peter succeeded John Charlton as Principal Inspector for London. From 1975 he managed a team of two inspectors and a research assistant, soon joined by a curator for the Palace of Westminster, a post for which he had argued strongly. He proved a kind, supportive, amusing and occasionally infuriating boss, infinitely generous with his knowledge and a mine of information on every possible topic. We all learnt an immense amount from him.

Increased resources allowed Peter to focus on the buildings and sites which particularly interested him, first and foremost the Tower of London. Other favourites were Audley End House, Wrest Park and Osborne which gave him a chance to exercise his enthusiasm for the restoration of historic gardens.

The London inspectors had always worked closely with the Directorate's historic building architects on the palaces, parks and government historic buildings. In the early 1980s a re-organisation greatly expanded Peter's management responsibilities and during the final years of his career he led a multi-disciplinary team of inspectors, curators, conservation architects, paint-research

specialists and architectural draughtsmen and illustrators, one of the first to be established in what was shortly to become English Heritage.

Projects with which Peter was particularly involved during the 1980s included the pioneering Royal Parks historic landscape surveys, the restoration and redisplay of the Wakefield Tower at the Tower of London, the restoration of Frogmore House and continuing efforts to find a solution to the deteriorating state of Hill Hall in Essex. A year before his retirement in 1987, he and his team had were at the centre of the English Heritage response to the Hampton Court fire. Earlier, Peter had contributed an article on the east window of the Chapel Royal at Hampton Court Palace in the journal *Architectural History* (27 for 1984), a volume that formed the Festschrift in honour of Howard Colvin.

Alongside his day-to-day responsibilities, Peter always found time to pursue his specialist study of castles. His significant contribution in this field is described below. He maintained his expert knowledge of Roman coins, presumably a legacy of his time at the Verulamium Museum, testified to by a series of coin reports, mainly in publications of Hertfordshire excavations, including those at Verulamium itself, carried out in the 1960s and 70s. In the British Archaeological Report *Coins and the Archaeologist* edited by Richard Reece and John Casey (1984), Peter contributed 'Coin lists: some problems of the smaller site'.

Retirement to Hopton Castle in Shropshire provided new openings for Peter's professional and social talents. For some years, he gained huge enjoyment from leading specialist guided tours round his favourite historic sites in France and becoming much better acquainted with Italy. He also devoted himself, as Vice-Chairman of the Hopton Castle Preservation Trust, to securing the future of Hopton Castle itself, then seriously at risk, finally succeeding in placing it in the care of a local trust and obtaining funding for its repair from English Heritage.





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Castle studies were always Peter's first great love. His earliest foray into that field, as far as leading to a publication was concerned, was directing, with his colleague, Michael Thompson, a four-season excavation of Richard's Castle in Herefordshire from 1962 to 1964, funded by a number of bodies, including the Society of Antiquaries. This motte and bailey castle is regarded as one of the handful of castles established by the Normans before 1066. The key result was discovering the remains of an octagonal tower on the summit of the motte, dating to the twelfth century. The results appeared in the 1969 issue of the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*.

Peter became involved with the Château Gaillard Colloque, founded by Michel de Bouard, and its biennial conferences, becoming a member of the Comité Permanent, as well as its President following the 1994 conference held in Abergavenny. He published papers in the CG proceedings on the Wakefield Tower in the Tower of London and St Briavels Castle, Gloucestershire (with E. A. Johnson). His connection with the Tower of London led him to write, with R. Allen Brown, the 'Ministry Blue Guide' to the Tower (1984), one of the finest castle guidebooks in this series. Two papers on the Tower appeared in the Festschrift for his colleague Arnold Taylor (1977) and that for Michel de Bouard (1982); another was published in a book on the Tower and its institutions (1978).

His association with Allen Brown led him to write an account of Le Coudray-Salbart in France for the second volume of *Anglo-Norman Studies* edited by Brown, and Peter contributed a paper to the Allen Brown Festschrift in 1989 on Hopton Castle in Shropshire, the village to which he had retired. The article remains the definitive account of this castle.

One of JRK's most enjoyable experiences in the field of castle studies was to explore with Peter the building at Ludlow Castle known as

Mortimer's Tower. The joint paper formed a chapter in the Logaston Press book on the castle, first published in 2000.

Besides short papers on excavations at Windsor and Berkhamsted castles, Peter contributed to the Royal Archaeological Institute's summer meetings programmes, including a detailed, but unpublished, account of Warwick Castle, a copy of which is in the Society of Antiquaries' Library, tract collection.

His contribution to castle studies was undoubtedly a valuable one, but Peter will perhaps be best remembered by his friends and colleagues for the breadth of his knowledge and interests, for his friendship, his sociability, his quiet wit and his idiosyncratic way with words ("Pull up a floorboard (take a seat); can you tripe (type)?"), but above all for his unforced and unselfconscious kindness. His was a good life, lived to the full.

Peter Curnow's writings on castles

'Royal lodgings of the 13th century in the lower ward of Windsor Castle: some recent archaeological discoveries', *Report of the Society of the Friends of St George's and the Descendants of the Knights of the Garter 4*: 6 (1965), 218-28

'No. 2 Canons' Cloister, Windsor Castle', *ibid* 4: 7 (1965-66), 283-86

'Chilham Castle and Jacobean house', *Archaeological Journal* 126 (1969), 260

(with M. W. Thompson) 'Excavations at Richard's Castle, Herefordshire, 1962-64', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 3 ser. 32 (1969), 105-27

'Berkhamsted Castle: excavations at the south-east tower', *Hertfordshire Archaeology* 2 (1970), 66-71

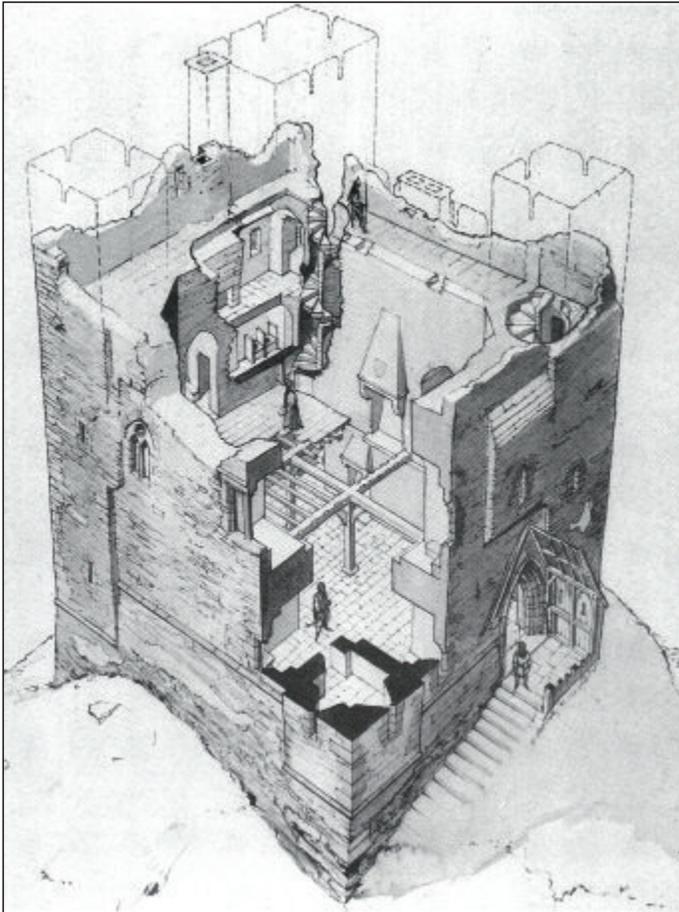
'Clitheroe Castle', *Archaeological Journal* 127 (1970), 280

Warwick Castle. Unpublished detailed typescript prepared for the Royal Archaeological Institute's summer meeting at Warwick in 1971. Copy in the Library of the Society of Antiquaries





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Hopton Castle. A cut-away perspective by Terry Ball. In retirement Peter Curnow was jointly responsible for securing the future of the tower house, not far from where he lived. View from the north-east.

'A minor discovery in the Henry VIII's Gate-house' [Windsor], *Report of the Society of the Friends of St George's and the Descendants of the Knights of the Garter* 5: 6 (1974-75), 249-50

'Warkworth Castle', *Archaeological Journal* 133 (1975), 154-59

'The Wakefield Tower, Tower of London', *Château Gaillard* 8 (1977), 87-101

'The Wakefield Tower, Tower of London', in M. R. Apter, R. Gillyard-Beer and A. D. Saunders (eds), *Ancient Monuments and their Interpretation: essays presented to A. J. Taylor*, 155-89. Chichester: Phillimore, 1977

'The Bloody Tower', in J. Charlton (ed.), *The Tower of London: its Buildings and Institutions*, 55-61. London: HMSO, 1978

'Some developments in military architecture c 1200: Le Coudray-Salbart', in R. A. Brown (ed.), *Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies* 2, 1979, 42-62, 172-73. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1980

'Ludlow Castle', *Archaeological Journal* 138 (1981), 12, 14

'Wigmore Castle', *Archaeological Journal* 138 (1981), 23-25

'Some observations on the planning and construction of the west curtain at the Tower of London', in *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire Médiévales en l'Honneur de Doyen Michel de Boüard*, 65-74. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1982

(with R. A. Brown) *Tower of London, Greater London*. London: HMSO, 1984

(with E. A. Johnson) 'St Briavels Castle', *Château Gaillard* 12 (1985), 91-114

'The tower house at Hopton Castle and its affinities', in C. Harper-Bill, C. J. Holdsworth and J. L. Nelson (eds), *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. Allen Brown*, 81-102. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989

(with J. R. Kenyon) 'Mortimer's Tower', in R. Shoemith and A. Johnson (eds), *Ludlow Castle: its History & Buildings*, 195-200. Almeley: Logaston Press, 2000 + later edition, 2006

Note:- This is an extended version of the piece that appeared under 'Fellows Remembered' in the Society of Antiquaries' e-newsletter *Salon*, no. 470 for May 2021.

