# A Palace For Our Kings

## The archaeology & history of a Mediaeval royal palace

## in the heart of Sherwood Forest

By James Wright

*This book is dedicated to the memory of*

*Robert de Clipstone,*

*who stood up for the rights of his community*

# Chapter 1 - Introduction

'*This ruin stands on the forest, and was a palace for our kings*'

~ John Throsby's edition of Robert Thoroton's *The Antiquities of Nottinghamshire*, 1790 ~

On a low hill overlooking the confluence of the River Maun and the Vicar Water, amidst the gently rolling landscape of Sherwood Forest, stands an unassuming, roofless and ruined stone building (see *Figure 1*, at the bottom of this document). Sited just below the brow of the hill, it stands in splendid isolation in the eleven grassy acres of Castlefield. The building is made of local stone and is rectangular in shape, minus its south-eastern wall, and is approximately twenty-five by ten metres in dimension. To the west and north, the brick and pantile village of Kings Clipstone winds along Mansfield Road. Off to the south, beyond the fields of Waterfield Farm, the stark headstocks of the sadly dilapidated colliery at New Clipstone command the horizon. All around is woodland, mostly Forestry Commission coniferous plantation, but the occasional stand of deciduous trees can be made out. The western views are encircled by Peafield Plantation, off to the east is Sherwood Pines, to the north the looming mass of Birklands with the skyline broken by the majestic stone spire of St Mary's parish church two miles away in Edwinstowe.

The building has been known as King John's Palace since at least 1774 when John Chapman annotated his map of Nottinghamshire. In truth it was constructed over twenty years before King John came to the throne and was originally built as a hall for the great Angevin king Henry II during the late 1170s. At this time Henry was at the height of his powers and effectively ruled an empire that stretched from the Pyrenees to the Scottish borders.

After standing in Castlefield for the best part of 850 years the combined forces of history, opportune stone robbery, weather and utterly necessary, yet ugly, structural underpinning have had a dramatic effect upon King John's Palace. Without a thorough programme of conservation carried out in 2009 the building, which was in a very critical state, may not even

be standing today. The three walls are mostly formed of a randomly coursed, rubble core of magnesian limestone and all but a handful of the facing stones, cut by highly trained Mediaeval stonemasons, have been robbed away. Dramatic masonry overhangs and soaring pinnacles characterise the appearance of what was once a prime piece of architectural design. Yet there is still the impression of eroded buttresses, two openings, the suggestion of a first floor level, and a vaulted niche. There are hints at former glory.

The theatrical remoteness of King John's Palace in the twenty-first century belies the fact that it was once only one of many buildings in a palatial complex known as the King's Houses which sprawled across seven and a half acres of ground. The site was one of the very largest royal residences ever to have graced England during the Mediaeval period. Piercing a great wall encircling the site was a gatehouse tower which allowed access from the village street into a wide courtyard full of buildings such as the huge stable block capable of holding two hundred horses, a timber-framed chamber on a groundwall of stone built to accommodate the household knights and a chapel containing a chantry dedicated to the memory of Henry II with great glazed windows and decorated with elaborate sculpture. Dominating the view was a lofty great hall with a central hearth. The hall, which was filled with trestle tables and benches, served as the beating heart of the palace around which the daily rhythms of the royal court centred. It was connected by a passage to a kitchen with attached buttery and pantry for the storage for beer and bread which were so necessary for feeding the vast royal retinue that may have numbered in excess of five hundred souls. Beyond the upper end of the hall were the royal quarters. Separate suites were built for king and queen that incorporated chapels, chambers, wardrobes, privies, halls and kitchens that were lavishly appointed and kept warm by fireplaces set beneath great chimneys.

From the royal chambers the occupants would have been able to see neatly maintained gardens on the lower slopes of the hill and, to the east, a vast lake created by damming the Vicar Water. Rising up on the opposite slopes of the valley was an enormous rabbit warren beneath the vast Clipstone Wood. The village, newly styled *Clipiston Regis*, was surrounded

by its open fields worked by the tenant farmers. Their simple timber houses had long and narrow strips of land, reaching down the River Maun, within which they grew herbs and vegetables. Perhaps they also kept animals there too. Mills took advantage of Clipstone Dam and ground flour for the people. Further out to the west, south-east, and north-east were areas of deliberately cleared grassland, known as launds. Beyond them was yet more woodland. Far and away the best view lay to the west. From the upper rooms of the palace there was a view of the vast enclosed deer park whose timber pale fence ran for over seven miles in circumference. Within it was more high ground which dropped down steeply into the valley of the River Maun, the entire enclosed landscape cloaked in oak and birch woodland interspersed with open areas of heather and gorse – and teeming with fallow deer.

On a cold, wet and windy winter's morning this may all seem like a fanciful notion as one peers out across a damp muddy field at the rain dripping off the eroded masonry of the ruin. Many have scoffed at the idea that this was ever more than a simple hunting lodge. However the historical documents speak confidently of the presence of eight Plantagenet monarchs here within what was a very sumptuous palace. Across sixty years archaeologists have laboured within Castlefield and beyond. Slowly the lifestyle of these kings has come to light. The outlines of buildings buried for over five hundred years have been rediscovered along with beautifully carved stonework, painted glass from the windows, pottery that once sat on the tables in front of the household, clasps from illuminated books handwritten by monks, strap-ends from belts which once wrapped around fine clothing, seals belonging to knights, pendants from their horse harness, and coins with the very faces of the kings who stayed here upon them.

For over two hundred years Clipstone was the favoured residence of the Plantagenets in their great royal forest of Sherwood. Not only did they hunt deer in the park, but they held tournaments, hanged criminals, listened to choral music, drank copious quantities of wine, conceived a prince, built a fortress, met envoys from the pope and held parliament. This great assembly of the people reminds us that it was not just the monarchs who graced this landscape, but with them came their queens, children, dukes, earls, bishops, knights, clerks,

stewards, chaplains, poets, foresters, messengers and farmers. The ordinary man has had as much of an impact upon Clipstone as have the kings. This is not just the story of a palace in the high Mediaeval period, but it is the tale of how the landscape came to look the way it does today. It is the story of kings, and also of dukes, farmers, archaeologists and the community that live, work and study here in the twenty-first century.

*Figure 1: King John's Palace in Sherwood Forest, looking north-east*