

On the Trail

We wasted no time! With eager feet, adrenalin pumping, we took to the trail, ever curving as it down-graded for about 100 yards. Then out of a mid-morning mist it took form and shape, Holt Castle! It didn't look large or impressive, and yet we three stood gawking in hushed awe.

It cut an unforgettable picture with its sandstone walls of the same color as the sheer, rugged, chiseled motte of solid sandstone it stood upon. Both were in dramatic color contrast with the green, dense trees and vines "mushrooming" up, over and down fragmented walls. We stood on a low, sunken grassy place that once held water from the nearby Dee for a wide, deep moat that once had encircled the island Castle.

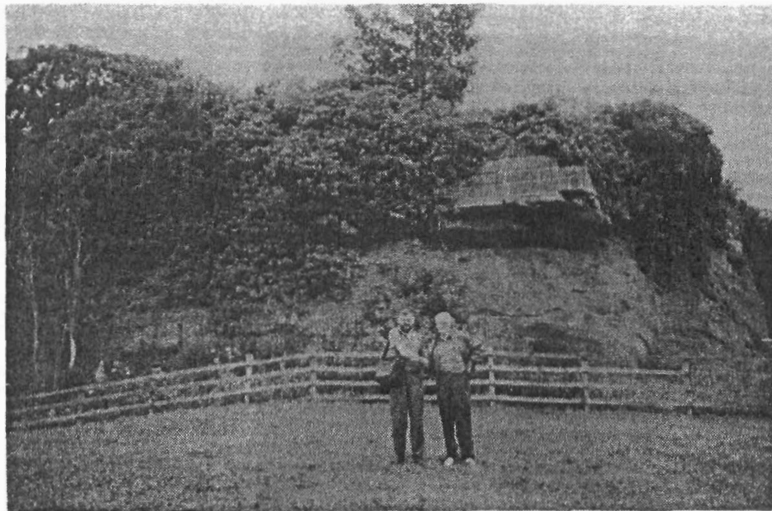
Holt Castle was built of unusual design, shaped as a pentagon with five large round towers (or barbicans). The Ancient Monument sign we read at the Castle trail-head has exceptional information and facts on the history and design of ancient Holt. Especially helpful is the attractive artist sketch depicting how the Castle must have looked in the heyday of its halcyon years. After visiting the site ca. 95 years ago, Josiah Alford wrote: "An old oil painting still exists at Holt of the Castle as it stood in those days." (Josiah Alford's Family Notes, 1908)

When Gil Alford first heard of this his quick response was (I have it in a written marginal note), "Boy, do I wish we had a copy of that!" So do we all!

Holt castle was begun in the late 13th century, following the successful conquest of North Wales by Edward I. He rewarded his commanders with large areas of land previously held by Welsh lords and princes. Earl Warenne was given the Lordship of Bloomfield and Yale, land which stretched from the River Dee around Holt and Overton through Wrexham. With no other existing site to use, Warenne chose to build a castle.



The castle was built around a rock of Triassic sandstone that was formed 1,245 million years ago. This huge block formed the inner courtyard with the outer walls and towers built from ground level, resulting in the inner courtyard being at 2nd floor level. An entrance doorway is still visible. The scant remains of walls are of the inner courtyard wall. The outer walls and towers, long since gone, protruded much farther outward. All those walls and tower stones were removed to build Eaton Hall at Aldford, 4 miles north. It's known as "robbing the site."



Have a look. Here's an image left over from history that isn't easily forgotten. Those who, at a future time, would contemplate a journey to "Thomas de Alford's Castel of Holt" might ponder this thought which later, in reflection, the writer was taken with: I wish I might have seized my opportune moment to scramble up, squeeze through and crawl over and under the dense overgrowth of foliage and debris that sealed off and obscured the "heart and soul" of Holt Castle. The very thought of what wasn't explored can almost drive one crazy.

In short time we walked the moat area around the sandstone motte and were rewarded with another starkly arresting view. We took it to be the back wall of Holt. There seemed to be only two viewpoints suitable for camera; the first view showing an entrance opening, and the second view showing a sizeable corner of the castle walls, still intact but jutting out with a precipitous overhang with little or no substantial foundational support. This castle corner shows the relentless effect of erosion and gravity over centuries of time. Of itself, it's quite a "show."

Seven hundred years ago Thomas Alford became the first Alford to rule as Lord of Holt. It was home for him, his family and related members for many generations.

About 1300 A.D. this Thomas de Alford received the ownership of inheritance and took possession of Holt by his marriage into the Family of Falwiz. He ruled Holt during the reigns of Edward I and Edward II. (Alford Family Notes, Josiah Alford, 1908)

Near the border of England, and sometime before 1311, Holt Castle was completed. It was during the Civil War (England had theirs long before our own in the U.S.A.) that Holt Castle gained importance. North Wales was fiercely Royalist while Cheshire was loyal to Parliament. The Castle was besieged in 1643. In 1646-7 it held out for a whole year before falling to the Parliamentarians, the last Royalist castle in Northeast Wales to fall a year after Chester Castle.

The Castle of Holt was built of stone quarried from Holt Castle quarry. This red sandstone is easily quarried and in addition to the Castle, was used to build Holt Bridge and many other buildings and walls in Holt. (From Scheduled Ancient Monument marker at Holt Castle)