

## Notes

1. The battlements of the keep have been replaced by a steeply pitched roof.
2. The castle was retained by the Refuge family until the late seventeenth century when it passed through several hands, became a spinning mill in 1814 when a water wheel was inserted through the chapel, and was subsequently divided into tenements until 1932.

## Bibliography

M. Chatenet, *Congrès archéologiques de France* (1981), 197–201

## LE PLESSIS-BOURRÉ CASTLE

Ten miles north of Angers, the castle of Le Plessis-Bourré is the epitome of the quadrangular semi-fortified house of the third quarter of the fifteenth century. It was built for Jean Bourré (1424–1506) who had entered the service of the dauphin in 1443 and became his first secretary. His financial expertise was also appreciated by the duke of Burgundy but in 1461 he became one of Louis XI's leading counsellors and subsequently treasurer of France. He also held key positions in several castles including captain of Langeais, governor of Amboise, and captain of Angers.

Bourré acquired the Plessis estate in 1465 and his successors held it until 1751. This residence was constructed in only five years between 1468 and 1473 though a thousand men were employed to achieve this speedy completion. Pierre Hardouin was the master carpenter and Ian Belotin was responsible for the glass. High interest in Le Plessis-Bourré stems not only from its completeness and unity but also from the absence of later alterations except for the pretty forecourt outbuilding of the later seventeenth century and some internal redecoration during the eighteenth century.

Constructed of a warm, creamy limestone from near Saumur, Le Plessis-Bourré like Baddesley Clinton in Warwickshire is low lying in the countryside so that it is hardly visible until the visitor is almost upon it. Le Plessis-Bourré is a transitional residence – part fortress, part domestic – combining the elements of defence with many-windowed ranges betokening comfort and internal elegance. This quadrangular structure does not rise direct from the clear, wide moat but stands on a narrow platform – a rare example in the Loire valley.

The defensive elements are limited. The circular corner towers are three storeyed to the front and four storeyed to the south, but only the south-east tower rises higher. At nearly 150 feet, it serves as a strong tower crowned with a double machicolated head. The enclosing ranges are surmounted by a *chemin de ronde* with keyhole gunports but the wall-walk is not machicolated and fails to extend along the east side. The off-centre rectangular gatehouse with its restored double drawbridge and machicolated parapet is more immediately severe but machicolations are limited to this gatehouse and the strong tower.<sup>1</sup> The castle's most effective protection is the extremely broad moat, over 140 feet wide and still filled from several ground sources.

The courtyard, 240 feet by 200 feet, is enclosed by ranges with seven feet thick walls and steeply pitched roofs. They are two storeyed with an attic floor on three sides but the importance of the south range opposite the entry is emphasised by its generous fenestration and additional residential floor.



PI. 102 Le Plessis-Bourré Castle: entrance range and chapel tower (centre)



PI. 103 Le Plessis-Bourré Castle: strong tower flanked by the south range (left) and the east range (right)

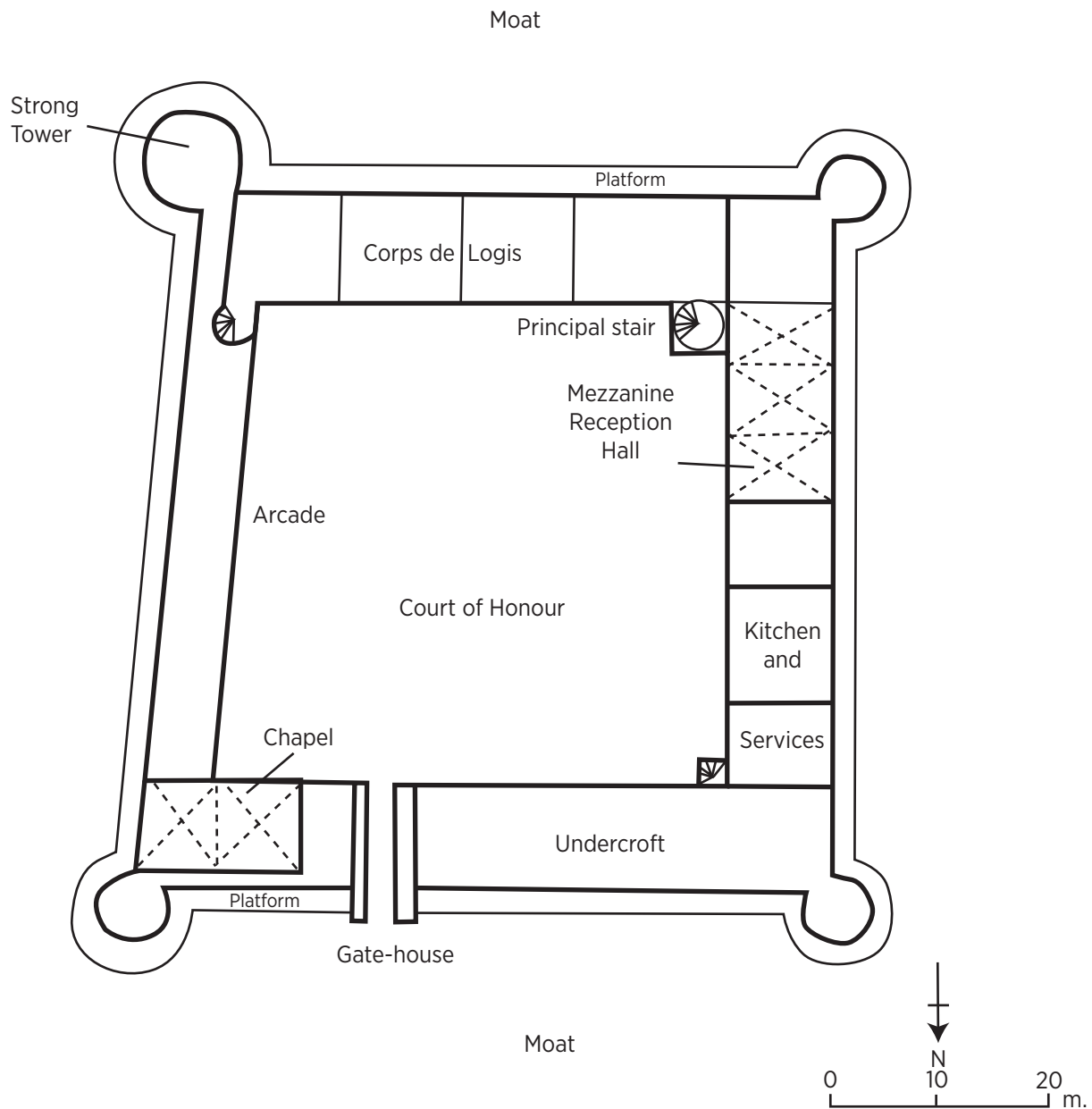


Fig. 62 Le Plessis-Bourré Castle: ground plan

Within the courtyard, windows have square hoods with stops though the chapel windows hold Gothic tracery, door frames are decorated with coats of arms, the *corps de logis* is surmounted by gablets, and the arcaded walk on the east side helps to create a less austere character.

All the ranges are of single room thickness and in planning terms, the sequence of apartments is clear. Moving in an anti-clockwise direction, to the right of the entrance is an extended vaulted undercroft with a guard chamber above, followed by the kitchen and domestic quarters in half of the west range. A solid wall separates these offices from the mezzanine reception hall rising to a vaulted



Pl. 104 Le Plessis-Bourré Castle:  
'Parliament' chamber

roof. The commanding south range of residential apartments on three floors holds an enfilade of four chambers per floor with the principal apartments at first floor level, terminating in the strong tower. A gallery above the arcaded ground floor walk leads to the chapel rising through two floors adjacent to the entrance. Stairs to roof level were positioned in the corners of the courtyard with the principal one projecting from the south-west angle.

Early engravings suggest that external alterations have been minimal while several apartments have survived unchanged with their original fireplaces, tiled floors, panelling (Justice Room) and heavily braced, high pitched roofs. To emphasise its importance, a handsomely decorated Gothic doorway opens into the reception hall divided into three bays of quadripartite vaulting with the ribs dying into the walls. The tiled floor is original while the end-wall fireplace has a brobdignagian moulded and decorated lintel and a hood sloping to the roof. The windows, as in all the principal apartments are tall, transom and mullion divided into two smaller above two principal lights, and with window seats in the larger openings. One of the prime first floor apartments retains its original coffered ceiling, divided by moulded timbers into 24 hexagons painted with French legends and scenes from Aesop's fables.<sup>2</sup> The strong tower of private rooms at the upper end of this range is almost detached from it as at Gainsborough Old Hall. The seigneurial apartments and the chapel near the entry are linked by an early example of a gallery, in this case above an open arcade. King René had built a similar but shorter corridor at Angers Castle (c.1450). That at Le Plessis-Bourré, nearly 120 feet long and 13 feet wide (and now converted into a library), has two fireplaces. It gave access to a private pew and to the two bay high vaulted chapel built on a scale unknown outside royal and episcopal circles. As at Maxstoke Castle over a century earlier, the chapel's striking three light east window defies any defensive function the castle might claim.

Le Plessis-Bourré is a country mansion posing as a castle, but fundamentally differs from its counterpart in England through its scale, particularly when compared with Kirby Muxloe Castle, initiated a few years later by Edward IV's great friend and chamberlain of the household. Le Plessis-Bourré displays a stately grandeur, uses the highest quality materials and workmanship, eschews flamboyant decoration, and reveals a gravitas all the more striking when compared with contemporary work under King René