

and administrative apartments – solidly built of stone and later extended, for a survey of 1606 speaks of “a Mansion House within the inner gates... twenty-three bays covered with lead.” The thirteenth century saw additions to the defences with the building of at least one flanking tower, together with a gatehouse, and a barbican. These were formidable improvements, but their strength was never tested by actual fighting until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1642, and by that time some restoration work was needed to be done as for years before only the barest maintenance work had been carried out; by 1564, in fact, the Castle was reported to be in “greate decaye ... and the repayringe of the said Castell will cost aboue fyftie pound.” How much that meant had to be done can be judged by the fact that when Banbury became a free corporate borough, and in 1556 a hole was knocked in the Castle wall to allow the transfer of a wooden cage to the new Town Hall, the repairs to the wall cost fourpence.!

On the death of a Bishop of Lincoln the land and possessions of the bishopric passed to the King, and for this reason Banbury Castle was held by the King for several periods between 1166 and 1318; but in 1321, when Henry Burghersh was rash enough to support the Earl of Lancaster’s revolt against Edward II, the Sheriff of Oxfordshire was ordered to seize the Castle and deliver it into the hands of Robert of Ardern, knight of the shire, who lived at Wykham. The Bishop of Lincoln ceased to hold the Castle from 1547 when it was transferred to the Duke of Somerset, and, on his overthrow in 1549, to his rival, John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland. When Northumberland paid the price of his treason the Castle reverted to the Crown until 1595, when it was leased, at an annual rent of 78s., to Sir Richard Fiennes, for the lives of his three children, William, Ursula, and Elizabeth. Charles I renewed the grant to William Fiennes in 1629, and the Castle and Castle lands remained with the Saye and Sele family until their sale in 1792.

The custodian of the Castle was the Constable, an office held by several members of the Segrave family of Chacombe, although the actual duties of the office were usually carried out by men lower down the social scale and of widely differing ability and integrity. Thomas Chaucer, possibly the son of the poet, who fought at Agincourt, a member of the King’s Council and already Constable of Wallingford Castle, became Constable of Banbury Castle in 1412. In 1507 the offices of Constable and steward of the hundred of the Castle and town of Banbury were held jointly by Sir Richard Empson (the unscrupulous and unpopular minister of Henry VII’s last years) and his brother, Thomas.