

An elegant defence

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A team of 40 workers is building a replica of a 13th-century castle in the forest of Guddelon in Burgundy without using power tools, in a project that is being financed by paid visitors

France has more than 30,000 châteaux, and the "big house" was always built to impress. Their design may have culminated in the gilded exuberance of Versailles, and there are passionate devotees of the Renaissance masterpieces of the Loire, but many prefer the more austere qualities of earlier medieval buildings, many of which were fortified.

French government figures count almost 43,000 listed buildings in France, nearly a third of these dating from the Middle Ages. Almost half are in private hands, and just over 6 per cent are recorded as *militaire*.

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During the past 30 years there has been a [reappraisal of castles](#), fortresses and "châteaux-forts" prompted by historian Charles Coulson's article "Structural Symbolism in Medieval Castle Architecture" in the journal of the British Archaeological Association in 1979.

His suggestion was that the military role of these buildings had been overemphasised. They were not necessarily utilitarian, but were elaborate and often nostalgic displays of wealth and power – the architectural equivalent of speaking to recalcitrant locals in a language they understood.

Of course, a seigneur would need some elements of defence, but having a place to entertain was also important. The buildings were not so much gloomy barracks where sweaty soldiers waited to wage war, as headquarters where rituals of courtly behaviour could be acted out in style.

Nineteenth-century students of this architecture focused on military aspects. Historian Robert Liddiard explains, "The warlike image of the castle dovetailed well with the then current ideas about the nature of medieval society. In an age when life was nasty, brutish and short, the castle was the lair of the robber baron."

The medieval mayhem theory holds that during the 11th and 12th centuries, brigandage, skirmishes and war were endemic throughout Europe, and landowners fortified their dwellings. There were rapid developments in design as defensive elements were borrowed from siege experience as far away as Byzantium. The great towers gave way to concentric castles, and battlements, moats, drawbridges and arrow slots became the architectural vernacular.

A fascination for these buildings has led one enterprising château

Pros and cons

- Thick stone walls with smaller window openings provide a pleasant cocoon against harsh weather in the winter, but can make for gloomy interiors in the summer.
- One man's "vue panoramique" is another's "bitingly exposed".
- Stone work that has stood the test of time is generally fairly robust. However, maintenance costs can be exorbitant and dealing with

owner to dream up a unique project. As a child, Michel Guyot visited many historic buildings in France. "I always wondered how they had hoisted the great blocks of stone on to the tops of cathedral pillars. My dream was to create an experimental building site."

He eventually became an owner of château Saint-Fargeau in Burgundy, where he watched workers repair the beam in his roof. "Great craftsmanship realised with time and talent. And this idea of recreating the work of an earlier era still excited me." A visit to a reconstruction of a 13th-century frigate in Rochefort led to the idea of a project financed by paid visitors. In 1997 he started a new-build castle in the forest of Guédelon in Burgundy. With its own quarry and timber from the forest, 40 workers are building a replica of a 13th-century castle without power tools. It won't be completed before 2022. Helped by a scientific and archaeological committee, the château uses castles at Ratilly, La Motte-Josserand, Dourdan and Yèvre-le-Châtel as models, and attracts 320,000 visitors a year.

Another restorer took on the impressive château Fort-Queyras, dating from the 11th and 12th centuries, near the border with Italy in the national park of Queyras. The building has 17th-century fortress modifications by the marshal of France and renowned military engineer Vauban. Owner Roland Marty, a former estate agent, says, "It's austere, yes – in the donjon at the centre, you are really in the Middle Ages – but it's comforting. When we pull up the drawbridges, you shut out the world." He is continuing the restoration, but would hand the building on to the right buyer. "Private buyers with means often restore these buildings better than the state," he says.



The owner of the impressive château Fort-Queyras near the border with Italy is continuing its restoration, but would consider an offer from the right buyer

repair problematic.

- Owners of historic buildings often find the only way to pay for its upkeep is to open to the public, but sharing a residence with coach parties is not everyone's cup of mead.

Others have taken on the task of restoring ruins and introducing elements of the 21st century. One Cathar fortress in the Corbières region has been brought back to life by its owner, who undertook to rebuild the ruins of a building perched on a rocky outcrop at an altitude of almost 600 feet. Helicopters were used to transport stone to the summit during its 16-year restoration.

Although the style of the interiors maintains a charmingly period feel with wood block flooring and large flagstones, modern life is discreetly incorporated, including a mosaic swimming pool. It comes with 100 hectares of land including an Appellation d'origine contrôlée (AOC) vineyard. It is for sale with agency Patrice Besse, at an advertised price of nearly €10m.

In a romanticised view of pre-Renaissance life, if an Englishman's home is his castle, a Frenchman's home is his fortress.