

Honour at stake to storm castle

IT'S eight centuries since Hedingham Castle last came under attack.

The forces of King John attacked the Norman fortress after Robert, the third Earl of Oxford, and other barons forced him to sign the Magna Carta.

The castle fell in 1216 but was retaken the following year after a desperate struggle.

Almost 800 years later the ancient castle was under fire again - this time by the Medieval Siege Society.

And as battle raged someone was bound to lose their head.

Reporter CHRIS WILKIN watched the action.

THERE was a danger the rust would set in as knights in shining armour suffered a deluge as they laid siege to Hedingham Castle.

Sunday's siege could have been a washout.

But honour was at stake and it was battle as usual as the forces of Sir Peter Samworth tried to storm the castle defended by Sir Michael de la Roche in a thrilling war game.

Luckily, Saturday's skirmishes were acted out in bright sunshine in front of huge crowds.

Roaring canons and the crash of swords against armour rang out as the castle was stormed by invading troops.



Ready for the action - The Medieval Siege Society.

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The battle was staged by 100 members of the Medieval Siege Society.

Crowds were warned: "You are sitting directly in the line of arrow fire - so move!"

Showers of arrows cascaded down on opposing troops and canons battered the castle walls as Sir Michael and his forces came out to face the raiders in a bid for glory.

An earlier skirmish had already seen

"bloodletting and terrible hardship", with the 400-strong crowd relishing the prospect of more medieval mayhem.

As last-ditch talks between the two sides failed audiences were promised gore galore.

Longbows are going out of fashion but they still "go through a man and come out the other side, even if he is wearing armour," said the commentator.

"If you continue with this folly, you and your garrison will be swept away," warned Sir Peter.

"If you fall I am ordered to bring your life to an end this very day - may God have pity on you," retorted Sir Michael, giving the signal for a free-for-all fight to the death.

"Bloodshed, screaming, death and murder" is everywhere, the crowds are told.

As hand-to-hand fighting begins it looks as though the castle is doomed.

But a last-minute counter attack turns the game on its head.

Sir Peter is captured and after a swift blow of the axe - "God grant you a place in heaven, there is no place for you here" - it is his head which is raised high on a pikestaff.

As the crowds disappeared, youngsters slashed, whacked and walloped each other with plastic swords in a show of aggression which made a mockery of the mock fighters on the battlefield.

Castle spokeswoman Diana Donoghue said: "The little boys love it. They hear the canons firing and the drums as they come in and they are jumping up and down."

"This is an accurate example of the kind of fighting, weapons and life of the 15th century," said the Medieval Siege Society's Jim Marsh afterwards, still in medieval costume.

"Our youngest member is my daughter, who is three and a half months old. The oldest must be in his 70s."

New members tend to start as archers because bows and arrows are relatively cheap. Everyone must have a helmet - to stop stray slings and arrows causing too much misfortune.

ADDICTION

As the role-playing addiction takes hold you can find yourself splashing out thousands of pounds on a full "harness" of head-to-toe armour.

Even that is no guarantee against injury and students of medieval mayhem have ended up in modern casualty departments on more than one occasion.

Personal grudge matches have been known to sneak onto the battlefield as combatants settle old scores by inflicting new sore thumbs.

But vendettas are usually smoothed out away from the war zone.

Jim said: "You do get bruised fingers and strained ankles, but we all go down to the pub in the evening together."



Hand to hand fighting to defend the castle.

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Men-at-arms prepare to defend Hedingham Castle.

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Heavily fortified to withstand sieges

HEDINGHAM Castle was heavily fortified against attack and able to withstand long sieges.

The keep was defended by 12ft thick walls and a moat.

And the castle was built on two baileys which would have been surrounded by walls with a drawbridge

between them.

Trees which surround the castle today would also have been cleared away to deprive enemies of cover.

The lower windows of the castle are narrow so archers could fire out but missiles could not find their way in.

And attackers were likely to get

burning oil on their heads if they got too close.

A tunnel is also thought to lead to the nearby fishponds and defenders are believed to have taunted their enemies by throwing fish at them to show they had plenty of food left.

Historic setting is choice of young couples for their wedding

HEDINGHAM Castle's popularity as a place to tie the knot is growing.

Another happy couple got hitched in the banquet hall before Saturday's battlefield action kicked off.

Chelmsford's Alison Foster and William Motley from New Zealand won the chance to get married in the Norman keep in a prize draw held at the castle last year.

"The atmosphere was wonderful," said castle spokeswoman Diana Donoghue. "It was really nice because they had a guard of honour for the bride as she walked across the bridge to the keep."

She added: "We got our licence last September. This is about the seventh wedding this year and we've already got 13 booked for next year."

Andy Bilings makes a point. Pictures: STEPHANIE MACKRILL

11031-d