

Chepstow Castle



The twin-towered gatehouse guarding the entrance to the castle.

Information for education group leaders

Chepstow Castle is one of many built to secure the border with Wales and took advantage of a naturally defended position. Its substantial defences and domestic buildings provide clear evidence of the various roles of castles in the medieval period and how they were adapted for later use and occupation. A visit will support the development of historical skills and enquiry at all Key Stages.

History

The castle was established by William fitz Osbern, a loyal supporter of William the Conqueror. The great tower was the first stone structure built, incorporating masonry from the nearby Roman town at Caerwent. In 1189 the castle passed to William Marshal who used his knowledge of advanced castle technology in the Holy Land to fortify Chepstow. Each of his five sons inherited and they continued to improve the castle. On the death of the last son, the castle passed to the Bigod family. In 1270 Roger Bigod II converted the castle into a palatial stronghold, building an extensive range of buildings in the lower bailey. In 1507, Charles Somerset became lord of Chepstow. A favourite of Henry VII and Henry VIII, he built a suite of apartments on either side of the wall dividing the lower and middle baileys. He also improved other buildings, adding new, larger windows and fireplaces. In the Civil War, the castle was twice taken by Parliamentarians. Afterwards, its fortifications were repaired and modified to take cannon, and gun loops were added for musket fire. The castle became a barracks and a prison for political dissidents. When the garrison was disbanded in 1685 parts of the castle were demolished and the lower bailey given over to industrial use. Following clearance and conservation by the duke of Beaufort in the nineteenth century the castle was placed in the guardianship of the State in 1953.

 Cadw



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government



The original castle doors from the main gatehouse. They date from no later than the 1190s.

Looking at the castle

The exterior

- Look at the siting of the castle and its use of natural defences.
- Identify changes that have been made since the medieval period (Tudor windows, seventeenth-century defences).
- Draw attention to the shape, size and position of the towers, and the arrowloops of alternating heights to give maximum coverage along the curtain wall.
- Point out the putlog holes, used to insert scaffolding for construction and repair of the castle.

Gatehouse

Believed to be the oldest twin-towered gatehouse in Britain. Round towers were less vulnerable: they had no blind corners and could not easily be brought down by undermining. They could also deflect missiles better than flat-fronted towers. The tower nearest the river was the castle prison.

Defensive elements of the gatehouse:

- remains of the barbican
- thick iron-clad doors (the original doors are in the exhibition)
- projecting parapet down which missiles could be hurled
- two murder holes at the beginning of the gate passage
- slots for two portcullises
- square holes along the top to support a hound (a wooden fighting platform that jutted out from the curtain wall)
- narrow arrowloops (the large windows are from the Tudor period).

Lower bailey

Extensive range of domestic buildings built by Roger Bigod in the thirteenth century. Use the external wall facing the courtyard to help explain the internal layout.

Kitchen

Three large unglazed windows set high up to shed as much light as possible on the working areas. Base of a large oven in the corner. Waste disposal channel in floor. Doorway onto cliff edge through which supplies were hauled from boats below.

Service areas

Service passage has large opening which used to be three service hatches. Pair of cupboards and door to latrines nearby.

Doorway from steps down to the cellar leads onto a private balcony overlooking the river, used by the lord and his family.



The doorway to the great tower.

Cellar for storing barrels of beer and wine. Doorway onto cliff edge through which they were winched up from boats below.

Great hall

Entered via a grand porch, designed to impress guests. At the west end, where a dais would have been, is a small room for use by the lord and his guests. Opposite are three doorways leading to the kitchen, buttery and pantry, from where servants carried food and drink in procession. Upper doorway on the left leads to the earl's chambers.

The great hall was heated by central hearth and braziers.

Marten's Tower

Medieval tower built to house very important guests. Very thick walls.

First and second-floor rooms have fireplaces and private latrines. Remains of plaster on walls, which was painted red and yellow ochre.

Narrow windows face the town. Larger windows (made even larger in the Tudor period) face the courtyard. Windows on the second floor have seats.

Portcullis slots on the main door and doors leading to the wall-walk either side of the tower:

Chapel with fine carved details on roof level.

Wall-walk with battlements. Statues on the battlements designed to impress.

Middle bailey

Entered by a small gateway which is protected by a three-storey D-shaped tower. The ground floor was converted into a kitchen in the Tudor period with a large fireplace and domed oven. No internal access to the upper floor from ground level. Upper rooms reached from wall-walk.

Round corner tower: substantially altered in Tudor times to provide more elegant accommodation. Modified at the end of the seventeenth century to house cannon.

Great tower

Ornate main entrance — designed to impress visitors.

Originally two storeys. No outer facing windows when built. Upper storey was one long room initially with narrow round-headed windows (one still remains; the position of the others is evident in stonework).

Joist holes for the timbers of the first floor. Basement used for storage and as an armoury. Small windows. No internal access from basement to first floor.

External doorway on the first floor towards the west end.

Semi-circular niches: decorated with painted plaster — in one, the decoration has been reproduced.



Part of the arch built to divide the first-floor room in the great tower in the thirteenth century. The carving is of the highest quality.

Later, the first floor was divided in two by a pair of large ornate arches. A second floor room was added above the west end at same time. Three ornate windows replaced the narrow ones on the first floor. Only their upper parts were glazed; the lower parts had shutters. There are window seats in each.

Later again, the remainder of the second floor was completed. A doorway on the second floor leads to roof.

Upper bailey

Reached from the middle bailey by the gallery.

Marshal's Tower: the upper floor was private lodgings, the ground floor possibly a kitchen. There are remains of battlements and arrowloops on the roof. The line of socket holes below the battlements is for a wooden hourd. This tower was initially the most western part of the castle. The curtain wall was lowered and thickened in the seventeenth century to support and withstand cannon. Musketloops were inserted in the wall overlooking the river.

Upper barbican

Built to add further protection to this side of the castle. Ground level was higher — the line of arrowloops marks original ground level.

Rock-cut ditch: this was the original western extent of castle. Narrow door at the bottom allowed defenders to leave and enter the castle unnoticed.

Remains of wall-walk and battlements.

South-west tower: an open-backed fighting platform on three levels to defend a vulnerable corner of the castle. Arrowloops provide extensive coverage along the curtain wall outside.

Gatehouse with murder holes, a portcullis and a drawbridge. For security reasons the upper rooms are only accessible from the wall-walk.

Before your visit

Look at a map of the area. Why was the castle built there? Identify natural defences.

Look at the plan or bird's-eye view of the castle. Why is it laid out as it is? Why were buildings positioned where they were?

Explain the function of castles: a defended home for a lord or a centre of administration.

Explore how castles were attacked and defended.

Discuss with children what they might expect to see during their visit. Ask children to make drawings of castle features beforehand and bring them on your visit for them to find.

Practise those skills that you want children to use to investigate the castle — observing, describing, recording and using plans.

Take advantage of your free preparatory visit to plan your on-site activities.



The castle in about 1520. Colour versions of this and other artists' impressions can be downloaded from the Cadw website.

Ideas for site activities

Attack and defence

How would you plan an attack on the castle? Look for the vulnerable sections. Might you use diversionary tactics? Which siege engines might you employ and where?

What defensive elements are built into the gatehouse? How many obstacles might an attacking force have to overcome to get inside? What means did defenders use to repel attackers?

How might the citizens of Chepstow feel when walking up to main gatehouse past Marten's Tower in medieval times? What would they have seen?

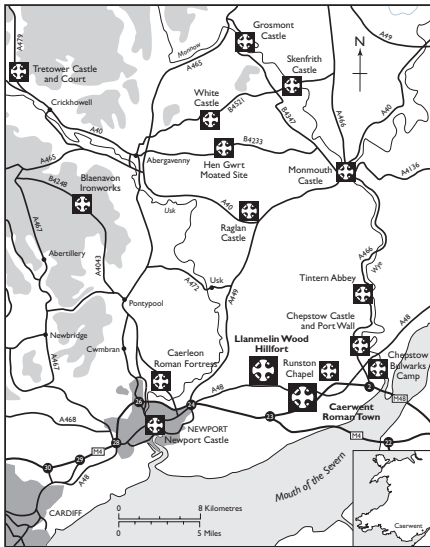
Compare the defences of each bailey and their gateways. Which one had the strongest defences? Perhaps do this in the role of a spy who has infiltrated the castle.

Living in the castle

Look at how the service range functioned. Follow the route of food and drink as it was brought into the castle from the top of the cliffs, to where it was checked before being stored. Move on to the rooms where it was taken for preparation and cooking, and then on to the servery where it was arranged before being carried in procession into the great hall and up to the high table at the far end.

Examine the external wall of the domestic range in the lower bailey to understand its design and layout and the relationship between the different rooms within it.

Follow the three building phases of the great tower. Use the style and shape of windows from different periods to identify sequence.



Was the great tower first built as a place of residence or for another purpose? How was it subsequently adapted?

Focus on the position and design of the doorways to help determine how the great tower functioned. Look for the main decorated entrance, the doorway into first-floor chamber; the basement entrance, the doorway to roof and the narrow entrance at first-floor level at the west end.

What evidence in Marten's Tower indicates that this was intended as a grand place of residence? List the facilities of each room. Which was the best room in the tower?

Look at aspects of medieval building technology — cooking, heating, lighting, and provision of water, sanitation and waste disposal.

Your visit

Getting there

Chepstow is signposted from M4 and M48. The castle is situated in the town centre. Pay-and-display car park with public toilets and tourist information centre 100m from castle entrance.

Facilities

Gift shop and exhibition. Information panels on site. Picnics only permissible on the mound outside the castle.

Access

Sloping terrain.

Steep steps give access to curtain wall and upper levels of towers.

Access to upper level of exhibition via stairs.

Hazard information sheet available.

Disabled visitors and their assisting companion are admitted free of charge to all monuments. Please note that, for health reasons, dogs are not allowed on Cadw sites, but assistance dogs are welcome.

Further information, help and advice on visiting the castle is available from the custodian there, who can also arrange a **free planning visit** for group leaders.

The Custodian, Chepstow Castle, Chepstow NP16 5EY
Tel 01291 624065

Buy the new-style Chepstow Castle guidebook at 25% discount for educational use from Cadw sales at the main Cadw address.

Tel 01443 336 092/094 Email cadw.sales@wales.gsi.gov.uk

Copies of the artists' impressions, with suggestions for teaching activities, can be downloaded from the Cadw website.

Cadw
Welsh Assembly Government
Plas Carew
Unit 5/7 Cefn Coed
Parc Nantgarw
Cardiff CF15 7QQ
Tel 01443 33 6000
Fax 01443 33 6001
Email cadw.education@wales.gsi.gov.uk
Web www.cadw.wales.gov.uk



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government