

# A big year for Denbigh Castle

On 6 April, Denbigh Castle will reopen with a new visitor centre and redesigned interpretation. Along with a walk through the town and a description of the new facilities, an expert explains why the castle is so special.

*Denbigh Castle's great gatehouse — the largest and most sophisticated ever constructed in the British Isles*



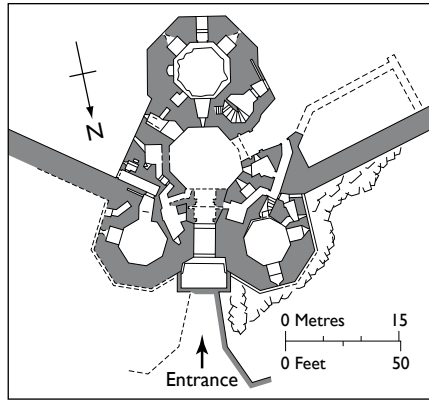


## A symbol of ambition

John Goodall, architectural editor of *Country Life* and author of *The English Castle* tells why the castle intrigues him.

At the end of the stiff pull up the narrow and winding Bull Lane, the riches of Denbigh unfold in exhilarating sequence. First the curious ruins of Lord Leicester's Church, then the tower of St Hilary's Chapel in an undulating sea of grass and finally, on the summit of the hill, the ruins of the castle. All these monuments deserve to be much better known than they are, but it is the castle that most intrigues me as a work of architecture.

Its buildings reflect in their scale and detail



*Denbigh's triple-towered gatehouse reflects the late thirteenth-century fascination for buildings designed with complex underlying geometry*

the massive resources at the disposal of their builder, Henry de Lacy, earl of Lincoln, who was given the barony of Denbigh by Edward I in 1282. The imposing town frontage of the castle begun in 1295 not only includes a line of grand polygonal towers, but is also backed by a substantial stone-built hall. At its centre stand the remains of the largest and most sophisticated gatehouse ever constructed in the British Isles.

On a bright day the gatehouse's north-facing facade is shrouded in shadow and the huge entrance arch, presided over by the figure of a seated king, feels like the entrance to a cavern. Despite its deliberate ruin in 1660, the overall plan of the building is still easily legible: there were three towers on

## Outside the castle walls

This short walk includes a few highlights of the town of Denbigh, many of whose fine buildings have recently benefited from a Townscape Heritage Initiative.

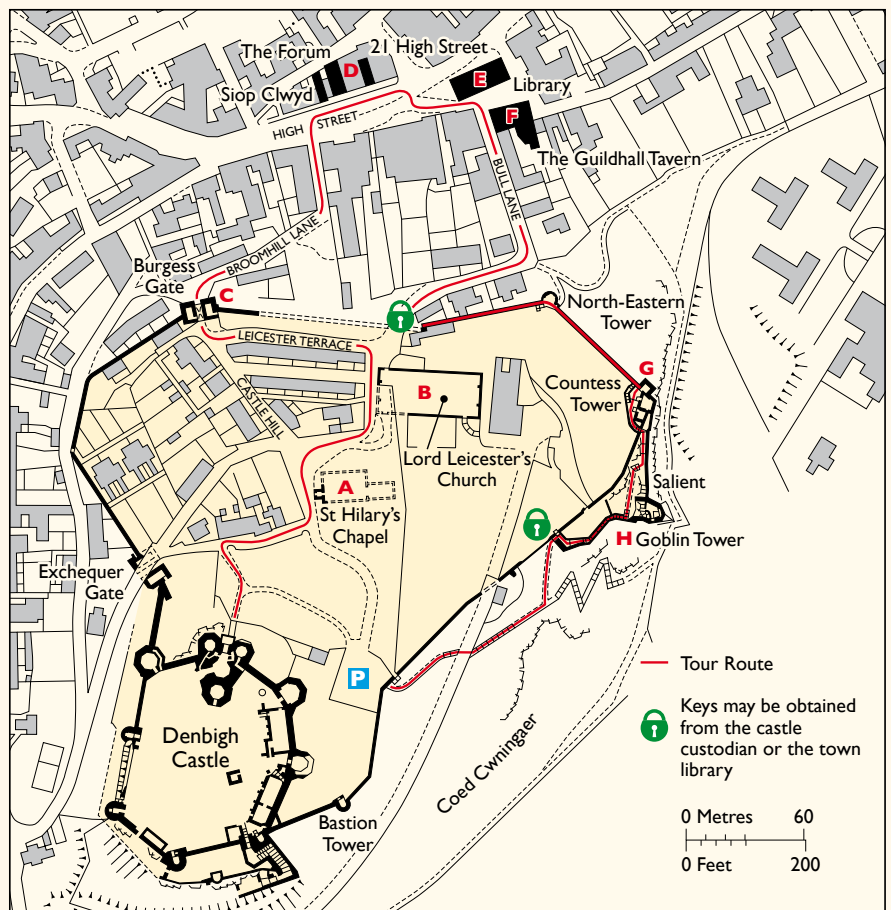
Start at the castle; if it is open, ask the custodian for the key to the town walls, which you will need later in your walk.

The area outside the castle gate lies within the late thirteenth-century town walls. The borough of Denbigh, which received its first charter from Henry de Lacy in October 1285, initially grew here, but, by 1305, there were already many houses outside their protective circuit. The extramural settlement continued to flourish and in 1586 the antiquarian William Camden observed: 'The old town is now deserted and a new one, much larger, sprung up at the foot of the hill ...'

The isolated tower is all that is left of St Hilary's Chapel (A), originally constructed to serve the English immigrants to the new borough. The rest was demolished in 1923.

A short distance away are the ruins of Lord Leicester's Church (B). Robert Dudley, the favourite of Queen Elizabeth I, was created Baron Denbigh and earl of Leicester in 1564. In 1578, he started building this large church, designed as a great Protestant preaching hall, to replace the overcrowded St Hilary's. Dudley may also have intended that his new church would replace St Asaph as the cathedral for north-east Wales. This was the only large new church to be built in Britain during Elizabeth's reign, but work came to a halt in 1584.

A stroll along Leicester Terrace will bring you to the Burgess Gate (C), a powerful



twin-towered gatehouse which was the principal entrance to the walled town. Its importance is emphasised by the chequered stonework at the top of its outer walls.

Follow Broomhill Lane down to High Street, Denbigh's historic marketplace. Across the street a colonnade stretches across the front of seven buildings of different dates. These buildings stand on an 'island' that probably originated as an early encroachment on the marketplace (D). Siop Clwyd, a small half-timbered building near

the middle, has been tree-ring dated to 1533, making it one of the earliest known domestic buildings in the town. Other noteworthy buildings here include the seventeenth-century Forum and 21 High Street, from the mid-eighteenth century.

At the top of High Street stands the Library (E), which also contains a local museum and art gallery. It was constructed by Robert Dudley as a new shire hall in 1572. There was an open colonnaded market hall below. The building

a polygonal plan grouped together around a central, octagonal entrance porch.

Inspiration for this vast composition undoubtedly came from a late thirteenth-century fascination for buildings designed with complex underlying geometry, notably the octagonal chapter house of Westminster Abbey and a group of polygonal porches, such as that to St Laurence's Church, Ludlow.

The immediate parallels for the gatehouse, however, are at Caernarfon: the two principal gates and the Eagle Tower which severally offer parallels for particular details of the gatehouse such as its triangular plan, its triple towers, its facade and its incorporation of polygons.

The intended original form of the Denbigh

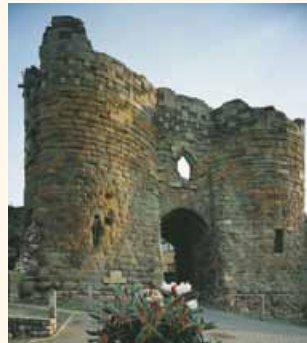


*The King's Gate at Caernarfon Castle exhibits parallels with Denbigh's gatehouse*

gatehouse is impossible to reconstruct with the evidence available. It might have been conceived as a very tall building in proportion to its plan, as is the case with three related fourteenth-century buildings: the great tower of Knaresborough, the porch of St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol and the Watergate at Warwick. If so, it seems unlikely that the building was ever completed, since early views show it as broad and squat.

There are few buildings that convey so vividly the ambition and power of thirteenth-century castle builders in Wales.

- *The English Castle* was published by Yale University Press in 2011 with support from Cadw.



*Left: St Hilary's Chapel (A) with Lord Leicester's Church (B) beneath the trees  
Above: The Burgess Gate (C)  
Right: The Library (E)*



was remodelled in the 1780s and the colonnades blocked. If you did not collect a key for the town walls at the castle, one may be obtained here too, on payment of a deposit.

Near the Library is the early-seventeenth century Guildhall Tavern, formerly the Bull Hotel (F). According to tradition, this served as headquarters for the parliamentary commanders Sir Thomas Mytton and Sir Thomas Myddleton while they besieged Denbigh Castle during the Civil War. The siege lasted from April to October 1646 and the castle was finally surrendered by the royalist Colonel William Salesbury, who was known to his men as 'Hen Hosannau Gleision' (Old Blue Stockings).

Bull Lane leads up the hill to the gate to the town walls (please lock it behind you), which were built simultaneously with the castle between 1282 and 1294. You pass the half-round north-eastern tower before reaching the Countess Tower (G), which consists of two angular turrets with

rooms added in the fourteenth century. The fourteenth century also saw the creation of the salient and the Goblin Tower (H), which surround a triangular piece of ground in front of the original town wall.

The hexagonal Goblin Tower contains a deep well, and the desire to enclose this reliable source of water probably accounts for the building of the fourteenth-century defences. During the Civil War siege, the parliamentary attackers concentrated their attacks on the Goblin Tower. During recent conservation work, a cannonball was found still deeply embedded in the tower's stonework.

Follow the path that climbs up from the Goblin Tower and leave the salient by a gate (please lock it behind you). A path through the woods leads back to the castle car park.

- Guided tours of Denbigh are offered by a team of volunteer tour guides. For further details or to pre-book a group tour, contact the Town Clerk on 01745 815984

Every September, Open Doors in Denbigh ([www.opendoorsdenbighshire.org.uk](http://www.opendoorsdenbighshire.org.uk)) celebrates the town's heritage and architecture as part of the wider European Heritage Days. It is supported by the Civic Trust in Wales and Cadw.



*The wall of the salient looking toward the Countess Tower (G)*





*An architect's impression of the new visitor centre at Denbigh*

## What's new at Denbigh

Cadw's interpretation officer, David Jones, surveys the new features that await visitors

When Denbigh's new visitor centre opens, it will provide the castle with up-to-date facilities of the kind that visitors increasingly expect at heritage sites. The design of the building incorporates many environmentally friendly features — such as a ground source heat pump, electricity-generating solar panels, a green roof planted with sedum and LED lighting throughout — but also offers a well-stocked shop, a café bar and terrace, and a multisensory interpretation area.

Denbigh's story is long and fascinating, from its beginnings as a *llŷs* of the princes of Gwynedd, through the construction of the castle by Henry de Lacy in the late thirteenth century, right up to the six-month siege during the Civil War. New interpretation has been installed to tell that story and to reveal the castle's complexity and sophistication as a palatial home as well as a mighty fortress. It also emphasises Denbigh's important place in the larger narratives identified in the all-Wales interpretation plans for The Princes of Gwynedd and The

Castles and Town Walls of Edward I.

The new interpretation, which has been tailored to the needs and interests of the many families who visit the castle, will begin as soon as you step into the celebrated three-towered gatehouse. The clatter of the rising portcullis and the heavy tread of marching soldiers will leave no doubt that you are entering a great and powerful stronghold.

Once inside, a short film in the visitor centre will introduce you to three cartoon characters — Huw, the castle guard; Tom, the kitchen boy; and young Eleanor (based on the daughter of Henry de Lacy's cousin, Earl Gilbert de Clare, and the granddaughter of Edward I) — who help bring the castle's story to life.

Trails featuring each of the three characters will help children and their families discover the castle's principal features and its intriguing hidden corners. Each character will have different views and perceptions of the castle, creating a multilayered and memorable experience.

If you would rather explore on your own, you will find new interpretative panels with reconstruction drawings and lively and engaging texts explaining what life was like for the people who lived and worked in the castle. There will also be a display of the medieval artefacts found during excavations at the castle and a handling collection of replica objects.

The new interpretation extends into the surrounding areas too, including the town walls and Lord Leicester's Church. These panels draw out the important links between castle and the town — vital in understanding the rich history of Denbigh as a whole.

The new visitor centre and interpretation have been funded through Cadw's £19 million European-funded Heritage Tourism Project, which is backed by £8.5 million from the European Regional Development Fund through the Welsh Government. ☒



*A preliminary drawing by the interpretative designers, Imagemakers, for one of the new displays in the visitor centre*