CHEPSTOW CASTLE

Bridge Street, Chepstow, Monmouthshire, Wales NP16 5EY

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I had wanted to visit Chepstow Castle ever since reading Elizabeth Chadwick's novels, set in the 12th and 13th centuries around the life and times of William Marshal, 1st Earl of Pembroke, who is considered one of the greatest knights of all time. He had famously built some mighty wooden doors, which are still gracing the castle, their authenticity having been confirmed by dendrochronology.

After eating a packed lunch in the car, we headed up through the car park to the huge castle walls that beckoned – well, they were definitely beckoning me. It was a very warm day and people were picnicking on the grass, but they weren't a photographic problem. I think the reason I prefer people-free photos of castles and the like, is because it then feels easier to visualise how it was back in the day.

Approaching from the car park (Marten's Tower left)

Chepstow Castle is a marvellous stone fortification that extends along a lengthy limestone promontory on top of high cliffs overlooking the River Wye. It is an excellent example of how the defensive capabilities of castles developed in response to improvements in weaponry and attack tactics over the centuries.

Originally known as Striguil or Estriguil, it was the southernmost of a chain of castles built along the Welsh Marches, a rather vague area between Wales and England. There is no evidence of any significant settlement at Striguil before the Norman invasion of Wales, soon after the 1066 invasion of England, although the site may have been a prehistoric or early medieval stronghold, since it overlooked a major crossing point on the river that was vital to communications inland.

William FitzOsbern (c.1011-71) was a close confidant and counsellor of William the Conqueror, known to have fought at the Battle of Hastings. The new King William I (reign 1066-87) richly rewarded him for his loyalty and service by granting him the title of earl and the lands of the original Anglo-Saxon earldom of Hereford, as well as extensive areas of the adjoining shires, including Chepstow.

The speed at which the castle was built at Chepstow testifies to its strategic importance. Building began in 1067, or shortly afterwards, under the instruction of William FitzOsbern. When he died in 1071, he was succeeded by his son, Roger de Breteuil, who was a different character altogether and promoted a plot to overthrow William the Conqueror. The plot ultimately failed and as a result, the FitzOsbern family fortunes evaporated. It was, however, noted in the 1086 Domesday Book that: 'Earl William built the castle of Estriguil'.

The intriguing name of Estriguil, or more commonly Striguil, was spelled in various ways, including Estrighoiel and Strigoiel. This is likely to be derived from the Welsh word *ystraigyl*, meaning 'river bend', or alternatively from the Welsh words *ystre*, meaning 'boundary' or 'dyke' and *gwyl*, meaning 'watch' or 'guard'. The resulting combined word of *ystregwyl* could therefore mean 'guarded border/dyke', perhaps referring to the site's proximity to the southern end of Offa's Dyke.

William FitzOsbern also founded a nearby priory and over the next few centuries, the market town that developed between the port, castle and priory became known as Chepstow. This derives from the Old English *ceap/chepe stowe*, meaning 'market place' or 'trading centre'. The English name of Chepstow became in common use from around the late 14th century, with the word *stow* usually denoting a place of some special significance.

The limestone river cliffs to the north and the steep valley (known locally as the Dell) to the south were advantageous natural defences. The rock-cut ditch of the upper bailey and the significant slope in the middle bailey provided the eastern and western limits of FitzOsbern's castle. The enclosed area it covered was about 340 feet/103.6 metres long by up to 65 feet/20 metres wide.

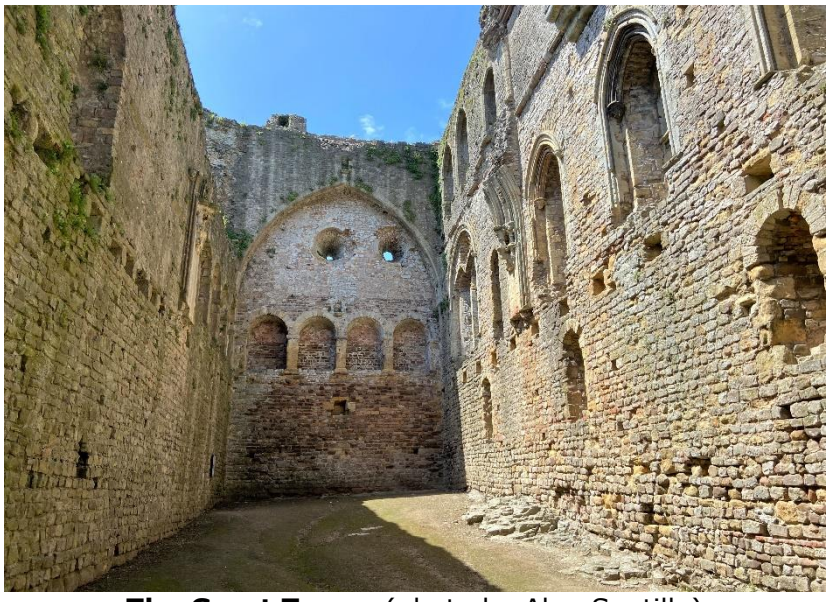
River cliffs – the Great Tower in the centre (photo by Alan Santillo)

The Great Tower was probably completed by 1090 and from the start was built in local stone, unlike most other castles initially built with wood during that period. As a structure, the Great Tower must have dominated the castle and it possessed some interesting recycling material – orange Roman tiles that were probably from the nearby Roman market town of Venta Silurum, modern-day Caerwent.

The Great Tower with Roman tiles ⅕ way up (photo by Alan Santillo)

A closer view of the Roman tiles

Originally, the Great Tower was two storeys high. The bottom level must have been overwhelmingly gloomy, with windows only on the safe river-side. A wall stair led up to the main ceremonial chamber above, which had much larger windows and decorative arcading around the other walls.



The Great Tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

Chepstow Castle remained royal property until around 1115, when King Henry I (reign 1100-35) granted it to Walter FitzRichard de Clare (c.1065-1138), whose family held it for most of the 12th century. It remained largely unaltered until 1189, when it passed to William Marshal by his marriage to Isabel de Clare (1172-1220).

In the 12th century, the castle took part in the conquest of Gwent, which was the first independent Welsh kingdom conquered by the Normans. From the 1190s, further fortifications were added to what was by then an old outmoded castle, by William Marshal, he of the mighty wooden doors.

He built the existing main gatehouse, which was constructed as a gateway with two round towers, and extended the defences by building a curtain wall on the south and east sides of the lower bailey, probably with a tower at the south-east corner. He also created a second line of defence between the lower and middle baileys, by building two round towers. One overlooked the Dell and the other was alongside an arched gateway near the riverside cliff.

The old curtain walls of the upper bailey were replaced with a much higher curtain wall and a rectangular tower (Marshal's Tower) was built. This addition contained a first-floor chamber above what was most probably a kitchen. Since it was in the remotest part of the new castle layout, this tower could well have been used as a retreat for William, his wife Isabel and their family.

Marshal's Tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

There's no doubt that William Marshal had a full life, firstly serving as a page in the household of King Stephen (reign 1135-54). He then trained as a knight, before going to Poitou in France and coming into frequent contact with Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine (c.1122-1204), the wife of King Henry II (reign 1154-89).

After saving Eleanor in an ambush, by putting his own life at risk and being injured in the process, he was later taken into the queen's household and appointed as companion to her eldest son, Henry, who was crowned at the age of 15. This was carried out despite Henry's father still being alive, so there would be no dispute about the succession. William eventually became young Henry's tutor in chivalry.

William accompanied young King Henry on the European tourney circuit in France, where the tourneys were rather more involved and extreme than medieval jousts. William became the greatest tourney champion of his time, but there was a great deal of conflict he had to manage and endure, including jealousy and much discord within the royal family. The young King Henry died of dysentery in 1183 in a certain amount of disgrace, whereupon William spent two years in the Holy Land.

On his return, he took up service with King Henry II, but they were troubled times and William was caught up in the enmity between Henry and his son Richard. When Henry died, William served the new King Richard (reign 1189-99) and it was then that he married Isabel de Clare, who owned lands in Normandy, the Welsh borders and southern Ireland. This led to other conflicts in which William had to use much diplomacy and strength of character to overcome.

When Richard died of a gangrenous wound in 1199, William was forced to change masters again, this time to the new King John (reign 1199-1216). John was very unpopular, but William stoically supported him as England lurched perilously close to civil war. The French king's son, Louis, tried to seize the English throne, but after a few days of severe illness, John died, leaving his 9-year-old son as heir to the throne. After a hasty coronation, William was voted to take the reins on behalf of the young King Henry III. By then, William was around 70 years old.

He set about reclaiming England for the king and succeeded, remaining at the head of government for two years or so, but fell ill at the end of 1218. He died surrounded by his family, after having taken Templar vows. His body was taken to Temple Church in London, where his effigy remains, although building work in the 13th century disturbed the graves there.

William and Isabel had ten children to carry on his legacy and it's remarkable that 800 years later, he is still considered England's greatest knight. Also, let us not forget his doors – his mighty doors, beside which I had the privilege to stand 😊

William Marshal's mighty doors (photo by Alan Santillo

The doors are the original ones from the main gatehouse, but now reside in the hall porch. Samples from them subjected to dendrochronology suggest they were made no later than the 1190s and they are revolutionary in their construction.

To prevent attackers from burning or battering down the doors, the iron plates sheathing the outer wooden face are held by iron straps and huge nails driven through diagonal washers on the back of the door – a contemporary ship-building technique. The attractive wooden lattice framework on the back of the doors is the earliest known evidence of developed mortice-and-tenon joints in Britain.

After William's death, his sons (William, Richard, Gilbert and Walter) continued improving the castle. In 1228, William Marshal II was given ten oaks by the king in recognition of his work on the Great Tower. William died in 1231 and was succeeded by his brother Richard, who because of conflicting loyalties, ended up quarrelling with the king and moving to Ireland, where he was killed in 1234.

The castle's new owner was Gilbert, who reconciled with the king and was granted lands in Cardigan and Carmarthen. In 1234, he was given 50 oaks for joisting the Great Tower and its west end was raised to create more accommodation. The remains of a pair of ornate arches can be seen, with Purbeck marble shafts, mouldings and carved decoration of the finest quality. This arcade divided the upper room in two and supported the new second-floor bedchamber.

The Great Tower showing remains of ornate arches

Four months later, Gilbert received 25 more oaks, which were possibly to repair the upper barbican, where the defences were subsequently rebuilt in stone. His later work also included construction of the south-west tower. He died in 1241, from injuries sustained at a tournament in Hertfordshire. He was succeeded by his brothers Walter and Anselm, who both died in 1245.

With no more male heirs, the Marshal estate was divided among William Marshal's five daughters – Maud, Isabel, Sibyl, Eva and Joan. The eldest, Maud, had married Hugh Bigod (c.1182-1225) and in due course their son Roger (c.1209-1270) inherited his mother's share. If only I knew the correct pronunciation of Bigod…

There is no evidence that this Roger contributed any new building at the castle, but when he died, his nephew – another Roger Bigod (c. 1245-1306) – inherited it along with various estates across southern England, south Wales and south-east Ireland. At first, this Roger was a loyal servant of King Edward I (reign 1272-1307) and supported the royal cause in the Welsh wars of 1276-7 and 1282-3.

He appears to have made Chepstow Castle his main place of residence and undertook a major phase of building work. Firstly, he created a new suite of grand private apartments on the cliff side of the lower bailey, which included a great hall, an earl's chamber, a cellar and service rooms. Work also commenced on the kitchen and its necessary associated rooms.

The great hall, looking towards service rooms & earl's chamber above
(photo by Alan Santillo)

The new collection of buildings was referred to as the gloriette and must have been in operation for the four-day visit of King Edward I and Queen Eleanor in December 1284, at the end of a triumphal tour through Wales. Following this, Roger Bigod built a remarkable new tower (later called Marten's Tower), which contained two apartments and even a small chapel. The tower could be isolated from the rest of the castle by barred doors and portcullises.

However, King Edward I's ongoing, relentless demands for tax to pay for further wars in Wales, France and later Scotland, led to mounting tension and Roger's eventual refusal to lead an army into Gascony. Roger and another sympathiser, Humphrey de Bohun, gathered together a fighting force and demanded a new legal clause that obliged the king to obtain the consent of his subjects before levying a new tax. That sounds such a good idea…

Despite the king's hand being forced, Roger discovered himself in great financial difficulty, resulting from the expense of having raised an army against the king. He was forced to relinquish his titles and lands to Edward (which must have rankled somewhat). However, he later regained them from the king and was granted extra money on the condition that if he died without direct heirs, the Bigod estate would revert to the Crown – which did indeed come to pass.

Rear of Marten's Tower

On our perambulation around the castle, Marten's Tower was one of the first areas we came across in the lower bailey. Outside the castle, the tower had presented an impressive, daunting impression, but from inside it seemed to be more benign. By the tower was a favourite spot for visitors to sit in the sun on wooden benches, but finally a people-free photo was achieved. Later, we ventured inside the tower:

Inside Marten's Tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

Back in the day, both first- and second-floor chambers would have been well-lit, with narrow glazed windows overlooking the town and larger windows (replaced in Tudor times) overlooking the courtyard. Each room had a fireplace and access to a private latrine. The walls were plastered and enough red and ochre paintwork has survived to give a good idea of how the upper chamber had been decorated.

I have to confess, I saw no traces of paintwork and my main impression was of dankness – but there was some impressive building work, even I could notice that!

The question is, why did Roger Bigod build this new tower to such a high standard, with a chapel and its own suite of lodgings incorporating details such as lancet windows containing seats? He had, after all, already provided a perfectly adequate set of apartments for himself and his household on the opposite side of the lower bailey. It was clearly intended for important guests, such as King Edward I (before the conflict). Incidentally, a lancet window is a tall, narrow one with a pointed arch at the top, looking somewhat like a lance.

A lancet window containing a seat (photo by Alan Santillo)

While we were still in Marten's Tower, we climbed to the top, where the remains of five carved figures looked outwards from the battlements. They had naturally eroded, but three represented a soldier bearing a shield, a musician and a knight.

A soldier, a musician or a knight?

Before he died, Roger Bigod extended the Great Tower's upper storey and added corner towers at the eastern end. He had the whole tower roofed in lead and built the gallery alongside – his contributions to the castle had been significant.

Although Chepstow Castle passed to the Crown on Roger's death, King Edward I outlived him by only seven months and its ownership passed to the new king, Edward II (reign 1307-27), together with Roger's other estates. Edward II showed considerable interest in the castle and many expensive repairs were carried out, as well as garrisoning the castle with up to twelve knights and sixty footmen.

The king's unscrupulous favourite, Hugh Despenser the younger, was constable of the castle and in 1324, he was granted the castle and all its lands. In October 1326, the notorious King Edward II and Hugh fled to Chepstow Castle (which had been previously provisioned), rather than face the rebel forces of Isabella, Edward's estranged queen, and her companion, Roger Mortimer.

Edward and Hugh attempted to escape to Ireland by sea, but were forced to land at Cardiff and from there they set out on a desperate search for refuge. They were eventually captured and Hugh was executed, while the king allegedly suffered a highly ignominious fate at Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire by having a red-hot plumber's soldering iron being thrust up his nether regions – ouch.

At the end of the 14th century, King Henry IV (reign 1399-1413) granted Chepstow Castle to Thomas Mowbray, Earl of Norfolk. In 1403, Thomas had orders to garrison and provision the castle against the Welsh rebellion of Owain Glyndŵr, but Owain's advance was stopped at Usk and so Chepstow was never attacked.

At one point, our own advance was nearly stopped by a group of schoolchildren in the middle bailey, but it was lovely weather and we simply prolonged our wandering to take even more photos. We even managed some people-free photos:

The middle bailey curtain wall

During the Wars of the Roses (1455-85), Richard Woodville, 1st Earl Rivers, had at first been a Lancastrian, but became Yorkist when he thought the Lancastrian cause was lost. He reconciled himself to the Yorkist King Edward IV (reign 1461-70 and 1471-83), his future son-in-law, but the powerful Earl of Warwick regarded Richard as a social upstart. After the Yorkist defeat at the Battle of Edgecote in July 1469, Warwick pursued Richard and his son John to Chepstow Castle.

At Chepstow, the two unpopular Woodvilles were taken prisoner and the garrison surrendered them without a fight. Following a hasty show trial, they were both beheaded at Kenilworth Castle on the orders of the Earl of Warwick.

During the following Tudor dynasty, Chepstow Castle came under the auspices of Charles, 1st Earl of Worcester, who was a cousin of King Henry VII (reign 1485-1509). He made the first substantial alterations to the castle since Roger Bigod over two centuries before, by remodelling the lower bailey into a splendid court. He achieved this by relocating his private apartments from above the service area of the hall, to a complex of buildings each side of the middle bailey curtain wall.

New buildings were added to the front and rear of the curtain wall, which was updated with new doorways and fireplaces. Elsewhere, different doorways and fireplaces were installed in Marten's Tower, in chambers overlooking the cliff and in the gatehouse, while the kitchen gained a new oven and fireplace.

On the middle bailey curtain wall, looking towards the Great Tower
(photo by Alan Santillo)

At the outbreak of England's Civil War in 1642, Chepstow Castle was owned by Henry Somerset, 1st Marquess of Worcester, who declared for King Charles I (reign 1625-49). The castle was in an undeniably strategic situation at the entrance to south Wales, but although the Parliamentarians advanced into Monmouthshire, they did not take the castle and were forced to retreat.

By October 1645, however, the king's cause was failing and the Parliamentarians encroached into Monmouthshire. A force of over 900 men, under the leadership of Sir Thomas Morgan, set up a battery of three guns on the hill that overlooked the castle. After three days of sustained fire, a breach was made and the castle governor, Edmond Fitzmorris, was forced to surrender with his 110 men.

The castle avoided slighting damage, but in 1648, after the defeat of King Charles I, it was seized and held by the Royalist Sir Nicholas Kemeys, with 150 men. Forces under Oliver Cromwell, en route to Pembroke Castle, bombarded the castle with four cannons. The garrison surrendered and Sir Nicholas Kemeys was shot.

After the war, the properties of the Marquess of Worcester were declared forfeit and Chepstow Castle was granted to Oliver Cromwell. The castle had naturally been damaged by mortar shells and in 1650, Parliament spent £300 on repairs, to convert it into an artillery fort with military barracks.

After the monarchy had been restored in 1660, the lordship and town of Chepstow were returned to the Marquess of Worcester, although the king retained the castle. The eldest son of the marquess, Henry Lord Herbert, was appointed governor, tasked with raising a company of 100 men and keeping the castle in good repair.

Henry succeeded to his father's titles in 1667, but chose not to live at the castle. In 1662, however, he spent £500 continuing the work of Cromwell in adapting the medieval castle into a fortress. It was also used as a prison for political dissidents and in 1668, King Charles II (reign 1660-85) had Henry Marten imprisoned in Roger Bigod's 13th-century tower, known from then on as Marten's Tower.

Marten had been one of the signatories on King Charles I's death warrant and remained at Chepstow for approximately twelve years. It seems to have been a lenient situation, as he was installed in the first-floor room with his longstanding mistress, Mary, while his servants were in the room above. He was allowed to receive guests and make visits to the local gentry, but he eventually died in the tower choking on his supper. One can't help wondering what it was…

We were still very much enjoying our wander around the castle-turned-fortress, as the weather remained clement and the photo opportunities kept appearing. I particularly enjoyed walking along the curtain wall, trying as ever to get my bearings and imagining all those other souls who had once walked the walls.

On the middle bailey curtain wall, looking towards the lower bailey
(photo by Alan Santillo)

By 1685, there would have been far fewer souls walking the walls, as the garrison was finally disbanded. Some parts of the castle, including the upper parts of the Great Tower and most of the internal fittings and floors were demolished and removed. It was leased to tenants and basically left to decay.

During the 18th century, a considerable area of the lower bailey was converted into an industrial estate. The tower by the middle bailey's gateway became a works for manufacturing nails and in the 1760s, the hall was used by glass blowers, making wine bottles for a Bristol merchant. Many timber-framed buildings were erected for various purposes, including a malting kiln, dog kennel and stable, while other parts were used as a farmyard. At least it was a useful place!

By the late 18th century, the castle was receiving a number of visitors on pleasure boat trips down the river from Ross-on-Wye, via Monmouth and Tintern Abbey to Chepstow. The Williams family were custodians of the castle at that time, living in parts of the Bigod range in the lower bailey and able to be summoned by a bell at the main gate. Much of the castle, though, was completely overgrown.

In 1850, the 8th Duke of Beaufort (the owner at that time), began conservation by removing the industrial works and clearing out the castle's interior. Paths were laid, rustic seats were added and trees were planted. Conservation of the castle's fabric began in the late 19th century and was continued when the castle was purchased by William Royse Lysaght in 1905.

Local interest in the castle continued to grow and the courtyard was used for fêtes, horticultural shows and annual medieval pageants. In 1953, however, Mr D R Lysaght decided to put Chepstow Castle into the guardianship of the Ministry of Works and since 1984, the castle and the port wall (or town wall) have been looked after by Cadw, the historic environment service of the Welsh government.

Stairs to the cellar (photo by Alan Santillo)

The port/town wall can be accessed from the exterior of the castle. We didn't have the time or energy to do this, but there is a short tour around the outside, along part of the wall to the town's gatehouse and then back through the historic market square. There is also an option to visit the priory church, before returning to the castle car park. No known documentary evidence exists to indicate when the wall was built, although it is likely to date from the late 13th century.

As our exploration of this quietly astonishing castle drew to an end, we returned to the earl's chamber and ventured down the stairs towards the cellar (photo above). The stairs led downwards from the service passage, with a door at the foot of the first flight that led to a natural balcony above the river Wye.

We continued down to the cellar, which although disused and dank, was quite a remarkable room with rib vaulting that sprang from corbels carved with fine detail. The cellar had been used to store barrels of ale and wine – there was no brewhouse in the castle because the earl was entitled to one-eighth of all the ale brewed in Chepstow. Barrels arrived via the river, as boats could beach within the cave below, with their cargo being winched up by a pulley arm directly into the cellar.

The cellar (photo by Alan Santillo)

Chepstow Castle has been used a number of times as a filming location. In 1997, Terry Gilliam chose it for shooting some of his film adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* and during 1984-6, HTV (now ITV Wales and West) used it as one of their locations for *Robin of Sherwood*. More recently, it was used for filming scenes in the *Doctor Who* 50th anniversary broadcast.

It had become quite obvious that another visit to Chepstow Castle would be well advised, to fill in more detail of what we had so far seen. There were some brilliant views of different stages of building, showing intricacy and a high level of skill:

Views of skill and intricacy

In particular, I felt I hadn't properly appreciated Marshal's Tower and the upper bailey – and as for the thought of seeing those magnificent doors again… 😊

A happy visitor