

Great Archaeological Sites in Cardiff



6. CASTELL COCH



Nestled high in the trees of a steep hillside (ST 1307 8263), Castell Coch with its round towers and high pointed roofs appears from the motorway like the castle in a fairy tale. But its present appearance, so unlike any other castle in Wales, is due to two men – the millionaire 3rd Marquess of Bute and his architect William Burgess. They used the ruins of a real castle as the basis for realising their dream of an ideal medieval castle but one complete with all Victorian mod cons.

A survey carried out by Victorian ironmaster, antiquary and castles expert G T Clark reveal that in 1850 the castle was buried in thick woodland, with heaps of rubble rising around the remains of the surviving walls. He could identify two towers and the hall block, although he thought that had been in its basement, rather than the correct first floor level. Twenty-one years later, the marquess commissioned a programme of clearance and excavation as the first stage of his grand restoration project. To produce his masterpiece, Burgess drew on the best contemporary scholarship, cherry-picking details from sites in Britain and France that caught his

imagination. Building work began in 1875 and was substantially finished within four years, although the internal decoration which is such a feature was not completed until 1891, after Burgess's death.

From the outside, the castle looks thoroughly impregnable, with its gatehouse and portcullis, its three round towers pierced by lancet windows and arrow-loops, and the high curtain wall that encloses the circular courtyard, all surrounded by a deep steep-sided defensive ditch. The only thing that seems rather out of place for medieval Wales is the high spire-like roofs on the towers. But inside, Burgess planned a décor that was all richness and colour, with elaborate wall-paintings themed for each of the main rooms, and specially designed furniture to go in them.



Castell Coch is on the outskirts of the village of Tongwynlais (postcode CF15 7LL) near the interchange between the M4 and the A4054. The nearest railway station is Taff's Well, on the line between Cardiff Central and Aberdare or Treherbert. Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 171, Explorer Series sheet 151.

Timeline (the asterisks indicate the time-span)



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