

# Great Archaeological Sites in Monmouthshire



## 5. CHEPSTOW CASTLE



High on the cliff above the River Wye is Chepstow castle (ST 5333 9411) founded, as Domesday Book tells us, by one of William the Conqueror's closest friends, William fitz Osbern Earl of Hereford. The splendid Norman keep, known as the Great Tower, is the earliest surviving stone building in South Wales, and may have been commissioned by the Conqueror himself. Decorative bands of Roman tile built into the walls show that at least some of the materials used into its construction were scavenged from centuries-old Roman buildings somewhere in the neighbourhood, perhaps from Caerwent.

We do not know any more about the ground plan of the Norman castle. It will have had at least one bailey, but the fortifications of the middle and upper baileys which now stand on either side of the Great Tower were built by William Marshal Earl of Pembroke, the greatest military man in England at the end of the 12th century, after he received Chepstow as part of his wife's inheritance. He also built the outer bailey. In the outer bailey wall is the main gate-house. It was given state-of-the art round towers, and there were two more built into the middle bailey wall. The original doors of the main gatehouse – the oldest doors in Europe – still survive, although they have been moved to where they can be better protected. The upper bailey at the rear of the castle only had a small postern gate, and it was the marshal's sons who

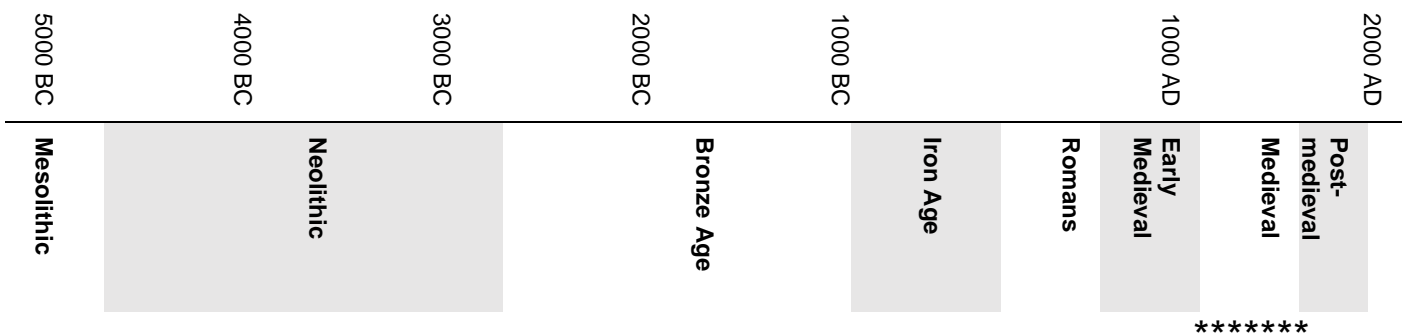
strengthened the defences on this side in the first half of the 13th century by building a barbican. Towards the end of this century, Roger Bigod Earl of Norfolk, the new lord of Chepstow, added a gatehouse to it, as well as a new tower in the corner of the lower bailey, where he also built an impressive suite of residential rooms. These included a new hall and a private bedchamber for the earl, which was known as the Gloriette. Having finished bringing the outer bailey up to date, Roger Bigod then gave the Great Tower a thorough makeover which included adding new towers.

By Tudor times, the main preoccupation was improving comfort. The residential parts of the castle in the lower bailey were overhauled and extended by the addition of new buildings which no longer survive. The castle's military purposes had not altogether ceased, as was apparent in the next century when it was besieged on two occasions.



Chepstow is served by a railway station on the Cardiff to Gloucester line. There is a large car park for the castle at NP16 5EY (follow the one-way street in the town). Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 162, Explorer Series Outdoor Leisure sheet 14.

**Timeline** (the asterisks indicate the time-span)



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