

Bridgwater Town Council

Blake Museum



Bridgwater Castle

By

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Artist's impression of Bridgwater castle

Bridgwater Castle was huge. Imagine standing on the town bridge. The castle stretched from roughly where the Fountain Pub stands today, right along West Quay to Chandos Street, from there to the corner of King Square where it connects to Northgate, from there to the Cornhill at York Buildings, then back again to the Fountain. It was also very impressive, the antiquarian John Leland, visiting Bridgwater in the 1540s, described it as *'sumtyme a right fair and strong Peace of Worke, but now al goyng to mere Ruine'*. Very, very little survives today.

The castle was built for the founder of Bridgwater, William Briwerre (d. 1226), who was a very important royal administrator and judge for King John. Work started on the castle around the year 1200, when Briwerre was granted a licence to do so, although he may have already started before getting this medieval form of planning permission. One of the few features of the castle to survive today, the Watergate on West Quay, was built with a round arch in a style called 'Romanesque', which was going out of fashion at the time (being replaced with pointed 'gothic' arches). The Watergate was essentially the

back door to the castle, which gave access to the quay on the riverside.

A successful lawyer called Henry Harvey purchased the castle in 1630 and he set about turning it into a fashionable stately home. The old castle had been divided in two, into the outer bailey by the Cornhill and the Inner Bailey in the Castle Street area. A huge gatehouse, with two great round turrets, stood between the two, situated roughly where King Square meets Castle Street today (incidentally, when Castle Street was first built in the 1720s it was designed to lead up to this grand building). The huge size of this structure might suggest it was a 'Keep-Gatehouse', similar to the well-known examples at Caerphilly Castle in Wales, and may have been 'the Devil's Tower' mentioned in the records. Harvey took this gatehouse and turned it into a fine manor house with large fashionable windows and a new facade facing the river. Harvey was probably responsible for removing many of the old medieval buildings. The Harvey family memorial, which describes them as 'lords of Bridgwater Castle' can still be seen in St Mary's Church, although it is obscured by the organ.



View to the river through the Watergate

The only other way into the castle was the great main gate on the Cornhill. A ghost of the main gate survives in the little street, York Buildings, off the Cornhill: this probably follows the way into the castle.

The castle may never have been completely finished. We know that a great stone wall stood by the river front, with massive foundations, rising to about three storeys. Part of it can still be seen on West Quay, just before the junction with Chandos Street. Below where the wall meets Chandos Street was discovered the footings of a huge round tower. Much shallower foundations were found by archaeologists elsewhere along the castle perimeter and another much less substantial part of castle wall can be seen in Queen Street. Records show that part of the castle was defended by a great oaken palisade. It may have been that the east side of the castle was built in stone, while the outer western part was surrounded by wood. A huge moat, some twenty metres wide, surrounded the whole castle though, fed from springs in the west. Imagine standing on Fore Street and seeing the moat stretch right along its northern side.

The castle had a great tower, some sort of Keep, known as the 'Devil's Tower', which might indicate the popularity of Briwerre or the Mortimers to the townsfolk. There is mention of a kitchen, a cellar and prison, which may have been in this tower. In the grounds stood a chapel, which had a slate roof and a bell cot, which was dedicated to Saint Mark and administered by the brethren of the semi-monastic hospital of St John in Eastover. There was a barn to store grain and produce from the castle's estates of Durleigh and Haygrove, stables to house the lord's riding and work horses, a horse-powered mill for grinding the grain from the barn into flour, a dovecot to provide bird meat and guano fertiliser, as well as enough free space left over to graze the

horses and a few cattle, and for archery practice. There was a walled kitchen garden, a pound for stray animals and an orchard. One little house from the castle seems to survive; a small medieval cottage forms part of the core of the County Club in King Square (imagine the building's L shape – the old part is the foot of the L).

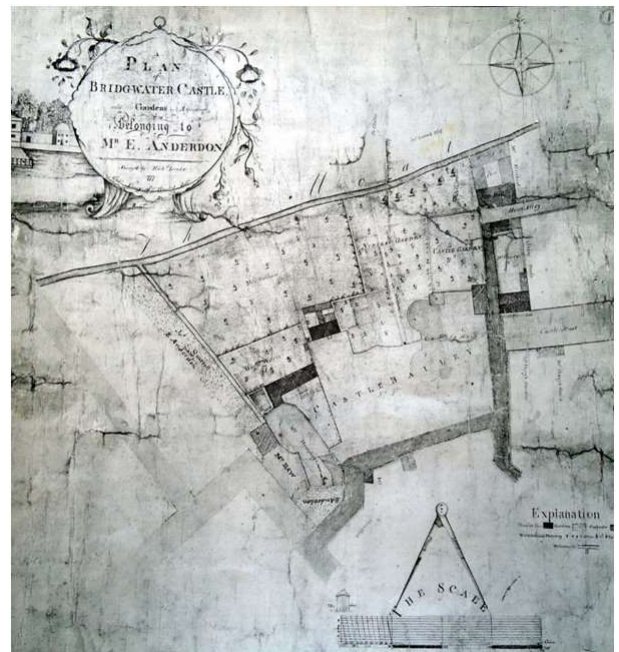
After Briwerre's son died without heirs, the castle and its attached estates eventually passed, via the marriage of his daughters, to the Mortimer family. If the name sounds familiar it is because Roger Mortimer, first Earl of March (1287-1330) famously arranged for Edward II's murder, in folk lore remembered as being by a red-hot poker up the bottom. The Mortimers were very rich, but seldom resided in Bridgwater. Finding the main tower to be a bit too small for their needs, the Mortimers converted the castle barn into a great hall, and this barn conversion became known as 'Mortimer's Hall'. In the second half of the fourteenth century, after the Black Death of 1349, the moat running alongside Fore Street, from river to Cornhill, was filled in and built over, possibly to raise money from the sale of well-located property in the centre of the town. In 1495 the castle came into the possession of the Crown. From this time it started to fall into a severe state of decay, hence when Leland visited forty-five years later he remarked on it going to 'mere Ruine'.

A very widespread myth about the castle, repeated in far too many books and websites, was that it was 'slighted' or demolished, as a result of the Civil Wars and the storming of Bridgwater in 1645. This never happened. The modern artillery defences which surrounded the whole town were indeed slighted, the tumbledown castle and fashionable residence of the Harveys was a military irrelevance. There was no one moment when the castle ceased

to exist, instead, over the centuries, bits were gradually demolished or built over.

In 1721 the Harveys sold the castle to James Brydges, Duke of Chandos. Chandos demolished a few of the remaining castle walls, notably part of the West Quay wall, so that he could build his elegant street leading up to the manor house. He also built the smaller Chandos Street, the fronts of which were set upon the foundation of the Castle's north wall and the cellars built into the moat.

After Chandos, the castle site was divided up into parcels. Harvey's grand manor house fell into decline and one of the great turrets collapsed. It was recorded by John Chubb in the 1790s, before being pulled down in the 1810s, to make way for King Square.



Location plan of the present King Square



One of the towers to the left & Castle Street to the right – after a painting by John Chubb



*The end of the Castle – after a painting by
John Chubb*

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