

Chepstow Notes

Sammy the Seal

A POPULAR resident in waterways around Chepstow is to be immortalised in sculpture form for the town's art festival.

Following the success of the 2021 event, Chepstow Festival of Arts has decided to create a seal sculpture trail after the salmon-stealing exploits of Sammy the seal found fame online.

Sammy has been photographed numerous times from the riverbank at the bottom of the town, munching his way through salmon and other fish in the Wye.

As a result the theme for the 2022 Chepstow Festival of Arts is The River Wye - called Afon Gwy in Welsh

Untruth: [Sammy the Seal played in goal for the Chepstow Water Polo Team](#)

Mosaics outside Tesco:

Chepstow Railway Bridge [Isambard Kingdom Brunel](#) in 1852. considered one of Brunel's major achievements. However, even Brunel was not infallible, and his foresight in allowing for slight movement of the suspension chains against supports on the bridge-deck to relieve stress, led to a weakening of the structure. In the 1950s, the speed of trains using the bridge was restricted to 15 miles per hour. 1962 replacement. The supports are still the same.

National Shipyard No.1 was developed on an existing yard established in 1916 by the Standard Shipbuilding Company. It was located on the west bank of River Wye, immediately south of the town's railway bridge. The yard's aim was to mass-produce pre-fab ships to a "standard" design. It comprised eight slipways which were each capable of building ships of up to 600 feet in length and of up to 300 tons in mass. There were labour disputes, poor quality workmanship compared to existing shipyards and by the end of the war no prefab ships had been launched.

Portwall

The wall that defended the mediaeval town of Chepstow has been called the Portwall for many years. It was apparently planned and built as a whole by order of the Roger Bigod, fifth Earl of Norfolk, during the period 1272-1278.

About two thirds of the original length of 1123 metres (1270 yards) still survives. A breach was made for the railway in 1846, and about one quarter of its length was demolished when the National Shipyard was built in 1916.

The illustration shows a partially constructed timber hourd or fighting Gallery and one of the semicircular towers. The wall now appears smaller as the ground level has risen by about 2m, there was also a defensive ditch in front of the wall.

Bill Townsend – Dambusters

<https://dambustersblog.com/category/bill-townsend/>

Flt Sgt W C Townsend DFM Pilot- Third wave. Only aircraft to attack Ennepe Dam. Mine dropped successfully, but failed to breach dam.

He went to Monmouth School. By the end of March 1943, Townsend had completed 26 operations and been recommended for a DFM. Training went ahead throughout April and early May, but dummy Upkeep weapons were in short supply, so Townsend never actually dropped one before the raid. Instead, he flew as second pilot with Les Munro on one test flight at Reculver. Munro flew so low that when the weapon was dropped the resultant splash damaged the rear turret. He had some difficulty getting the heavily-laden AJ-O into the air, just crawling over the boundary hedge. found the target obscured by mist. Also, when they started spinning their Upkeep mine it made the aircraft judder alarmingly. However, after three attempts, they managed to drop it at 0337. Although it bounced twice, it exploded short of the dam which remained intact.

Alfie's Corner

Alfie the black cat, born in 1994 and originally a rescue cat, was a part of daily life in the small town of Chepstow, in Monmouthshire, South Wales from 2003 when his humans, Caroline Gammon and her three children, moved there from Cirencester. Over the next ten years he became something of a town mascot and had been described as 'the most famous cat in Wales'.

He loved to bask in the sun outside his home, at the bottom of Steep Street by Merrick's the chemist's shop, and everyone, from the elderly to bus drivers, would stop to say 'hello'. Some people thought he was a stray, but he had a loving home and just liked meeting people and getting a stroke and a bit of petting; being friendly and gentle he had many friends. His fame spread much further afield when in summer 2012 the children, Tom, Sam and Alice, set up a [Facebook page](#) for him, and he gained followers from as far afield as South Africa and Australia.

If he were not there, people would miss him and ask after him, and many enquiries were received during the very cold weather of early 2013 — but Alfie was safely keeping warm indoors. However, on 12 March there was a message on Facebook saying that the last of Alfie's nine lives had come to an end and he had died peacefully in his sleep that morning, aged about 19.

Margaret Clayton

She designed built and owned the George pub and 50 other properties in Chepstow – the first known pub in Chepstow. She also owned the town gate and had it rebuilt in 1609. She used to hide the takings from the pub in the town gate to keep them safe.

Boatman – Andre Wallace - 2004

A naked male figure with his arms crossed, seated on a hull shaped pedestal, one leg bent and resting on the pedestal, the other hanging down, with another section of hull nearby. Wallace was born in Somerset and the sculpture was produced as part of the regeneration project for Chepstow Town. The Boatman is the figure of a fisherman and looks out to the River Severn from it's boat plinth at Bank Square. Many of the locals didn't like the fact that you could see the figures penis and many complaints were made, (probably penis envy) but the stunning sculpture in bronze is a wonderful attribute to the town.

Sculptor of large figures in metal of a populist nature, born in Somerset, where he studied at the College of Art, Liverpool College of Art, Royal Academy Schools and Royal College of Art. He gained the Sainsbury Prize for Sculpture in 1973.

André Wallace's 'Floating' series, installed at the Barbican complex, London.

Other sculptures as part of 2005 redevelopment of the centre of Chepstow.

Howard Bowcott – urns and benches

'A Chepstow's salmon's worth his weight in gold, Unlike the flabby fish in London sold'. Poem by local vicar Rev. Edward Davies. Chepstow, Wales

Able Seaman William Charles Williams

<https://www.gallipoli-association.org/campaign/ab-william-william-vc/>

Williams was born at [Stanton Lacy](#) near [Ludlow](#) in [Shropshire, England](#), son of William and his wife Elizabeth Williams. He was raised in [Chepstow, Monmouthshire, Wales](#),^[1] to which his parents moved when he was aged seven or eight years. He was commended for his bravery when serving aboard [HMS Terrible](#) in the Naval Brigade off South Africa during the [Second Boer War](#) and in China during the [Boxer Rising](#).[[]

He was 34 years old when the following deed took place for which he was awarded the VC.^[5] On 25 April 1915 during the landing on V Beach, [Cape Helles, Gallipoli, Turkey](#), Williams, with three other men ([George Leslie Drewry](#), [Wilfred St. Aubyn Malleison](#) and [George McKenzie Samson](#)) was assisting the commander ([Edward Unwin](#)) of their ship, HMS River Clyde (previously the [SS River Clyde](#)) at the work of securing the lighters. He held on to a rope for over an hour, standing chest deep in the sea, under continuous enemy fire. He was eventually seriously wounded by a shell, later dying whilst his rescue was being effected by the commander who described him as the bravest sailor he had ever met.

It was Unwin's idea that a 'specially prepared ship' might be rammed ashore from which 2,000 infantry would pour from a series of 'doors' cut into her sides, then dash along specially rigged gangways to the prow where a flat bottomed hopper would be positioned to form a bridge for the troops to reach the shallows. As a precaution some extra 'lighters' or barges, specially decked, would be towed behind the hopper to fill any gaps in the floating bridge to the shore. So the SS River Clyde a ten year old coal ship was converted. Unwin, promoted to the rank of acting captain, had responsibility for carrying out his own plan and took with him 15 volunteers from his ship HMS Hussar including Williams.

On 25th April, as the first wave of towed boats were within a few yards of the shore, 'Hell burst loose on them' as the Turkish defenders lashed the open boats with machine gun fire. The River Clyde ran ashore further away from the beach than intended which meant the plan to use the hopper as a bridge couldn't work. The unwieldy lighters were brought into position but drifted apart leaving the men unable to cross the incomplete bridge being mown down in droves. Unwin and Williams secured a rope to the drifting end of the bridge of lighters and wading through the sea heaved it towards a line of rocks that ran to the shore. But the rope was too short to tie round the rocks and so Unwin and Williams, chest-deep in water, held it in position so that men could cross the bridge to the shore, while Midshipman Drewry went to get another length from the ship. All the time, machine gun fire rained down and after nearly an hour Williams was hit by a shell. Unwin carried him on board and Williams died in his arms.

Able Seaman William Charles Williams was the first ever naval posthumous award of the Victoria Cross, which his father received from the King at Buckingham Palace in 1916.

UB-91 was surrendered to Britain on 21 November 1918 at [Harwich](#). SM UB-91 was a German [Type UB III submarine](#) or [U-boat](#). She toured the [South Wales](#) ports of [Cardiff](#), [Newport](#), [Swansea](#), [Port Talbot](#) and was towed to [Pembroke Dock](#), eventually being [broken up](#) in [Briton Ferry](#) in 1921. [6] [King George V](#) presented her deck gun to the town of [Chepstow](#) by in recognition of the bravery of [William Charles Williams](#) RN [VC](#) at [Gallipoli](#) in 1915.

Chepstow Castle tactile sculpture by Rubin Eynon – also did the Roath Mill sculpture in Roath Mill Gardens.

Chepstow Bridge 1816

Designed and built by John Urpeth Rastrick FRS (1780-1856)

Member of the Institution of Civil Engineers

In 1816 Chepstow Bridge was the third largest cast-iron arch road bridge in the world. it is now the largest cast-iron arch road bridge surviving from that period. The iron arches were cast at the Hazeldine - Rastrick Foundry at Bridgnorth in Shropshire where Rastrick was the Managing Partner and Engineer.

A civil and mechanical engineer, Rastrick is remembered today as a railway pioneer. He built Trevithick's 'Catch me who can' locomotive in 1808, and in 1829 he built the first steam engine to run in the USA.

Rastrick chaired the Judging Panel for the Liverpool & Manchester Railway's Rainhill Trials in 1829, and built many railways in Britain including the London & Brighton Railway.

Baked Potato sculpture

The art installation, placed in Chepstow to commemorate 10 years of the Wales coastal path, has received widespread derision after it was pointed out that it resembled a "giant baked potato".. The sculpture was unveiled as part of celebrations marking the 10th anniversary of the Wales Coast Path on Monday, March 27.

Television presenter Iolo Williams was one of the guests of honour, along with former National Poet of Wales, Ifor ap Glyn.

Chartists Plaque – where they sailed to Tasmania

Chepstow Castle

Chepstow Castle at [Chepstow](#) is the oldest surviving post-Roman stone fortification in Britain. Located above cliffs on the [River Wye](#), construction began in 1067 under the instruction of the [Norman](#) Lord [William FitzOsbern](#). Originally known as [Striguil](#), it was the southernmost of a chain of castles built in the [Welsh Marches](#), and with its attached [lordship](#) took the name of the adjoining market town in about the 14th century.

In the 12th century the castle was used in the conquest of [Gwent](#), the first independent Welsh kingdom to be [conquered by the Normans](#). It was subsequently held by two of the most powerful Anglo-Norman magnates of medieval England, [William Marshal](#) and [Richard de Clare](#). However, by the 16th century its military importance had waned and parts of its structure were converted into domestic ranges. Although re-garrisoned during and after the [English Civil War](#), by the 1700s it had fallen into decay. With the later growth of tourism, the castle became a popular visitor destination.

The ruins were [Grade I](#) listed on 6 December 1950.

Building of the castle

Chepstow Castle is situated on a narrow ridge between the limestone river cliff and a valley, known locally as the Dell, on its landward side. Its full extent is best appreciated from the opposite bank of the River Wye. The castle has four [baileys](#), added in turn through its history. Despite this, it is not a defensively strong castle, having neither a strong [keep](#) nor a [concentric](#) layout. The multiple baileys instead show its construction history, which is generally considered in four major phases. The first serious architectural study of Chepstow began in 1904 and the canonical description was long considered to be by Perks in 1955. Recent studies have revised the details of these phases, but still maintain the same broad structure.

Foundation, 1067–1188

The speed with which [William the Conqueror](#) committed to the creation of a [castle](#) at Chepstow is testament to its strategic importance. There is no evidence for a settlement there of any size before the [Norman invasion of Wales](#), although it is possible that the castle site itself may have previously been a prehistoric or early medieval stronghold. The site overlooked an important crossing point on the [River Wye](#), a major artery of communications inland to [Monmouth](#) and [Hereford](#). At the time, the Welsh kingdoms in the area were independent of the English Crown and the castle in Chepstow would also have helped suppress the [Welsh](#) from attacking [Gloucestershire](#) along the Severn shore towards [Gloucester](#). However, recent analysis suggests that the rulers of [Gwent](#), who had recently fought against [King Harold](#), may initially have been on good terms with the Normans.

The precipitous limestone cliffs beside the river afforded an excellent defensive location. Building work started under William FitzOsbern in 1067 or shortly afterwards. The Great Tower was probably completed by about 1090, possibly intended as a show of strength by King William in dealing with the Welsh king [Rhys ap Tewdwr](#). It was constructed in stone from the first (as opposed to wood, like most others built at this time), marking its importance as a stronghold on the border between [England](#) and [Wales](#). Although much of the stone seems to have been quarried locally, there is also evidence that some of the blocks were re-used from the [Roman](#) ruins at [Caerwent](#).

The castle originally had the Norman name of [Striguil](#), derived from the Welsh word *ystraigl* meaning "river bend". FitzOsbern also founded a [priory](#) nearby, and the associated market town and port of Chepstow developed over the next few centuries. The castle and the associated [Marcher lordship](#) were generally known as Striguil until the late 14th century, and as Chepstow thereafter.

Expansion by William Marshal and Roger Bigod, 1189–1300

Further fortifications were added by [William Marshal, Earl of Pembroke](#), starting in the 1190s. The wood in the doors of the gatehouse has been dated by [dendrochronology](#) to the period 1159–89. Marshal extended and modernised the castle, drawing on his knowledge of warfare gained in France and [the Crusades](#). He built the present main gatehouse, strengthened the defences of the Middle [Bailey](#) with round towers, and, before his death in 1219, may also have rebuilt the Upper Bailey defences. Further work to expand the Great Tower was undertaken for William Marshal's sons [William](#), [Richard](#), [Gilbert](#) and [Walter](#), in the period to 1245.

In 1270, the castle was inherited by Roger Bigod, 5th Earl of Norfolk, who was a grandson of William Marshal's eldest daughter, [Maud](#). He constructed a new range of buildings in the Lower Bailey, as accommodation for himself and his family. Bigod was also responsible for building Chepstow's town wall, the "[Port Wall](#)", around 1274–78. The castle was visited by King [Edward I](#) in 1284, at the end of his triumphal tour through Wales. Soon afterwards, Bigod had built a new tower (later known as "Marten's Tower"), which now dominates the landward approach to the castle, and also remodelled the Great Tower.

Later history

Decline in defensive merit, 1300–1403

From the 14th century, and in particular the end of the wars between England and Wales in the early 15th century, its defensive merit declined. In 1312 it passed into the control of [Thomas de Brotherton, Earl of Norfolk](#), and later his daughter [Margaret](#). It was garrisoned in response to the rebellion of [Owain Glyndŵr](#) in 1403 with twenty men-at-arms and sixty archers but its great size, limited strategic merit, geographical location and the size of its garrison all probably contributed to Glyndŵr's forces avoiding attacking it, although they did successfully attack [Newport Castle](#).

The 15th to 17th centuries

In 1468, the castle was part of the estates granted by the Earl of Norfolk to [William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke](#) in exchange for lands in the east of England. In 1508, it passed to [Sir Charles Somerset](#), later the Earl of Worcester, who remodelled the buildings extensively as private accommodation. From the 16th century, after the abolition of the Marcher lords' autonomous powers by [King Henry VIII](#) through the [Laws in Wales Acts of 1535 and 1542](#), and Chepstow's incorporation as part of the new county of [Monmouthshire](#), the castle became more designed for occupation as a great house.^[7]

The Civil War and its aftermath

The castle saw action again during the [English Civil War](#), when it was in the front line between [Royalist Monmouthshire](#) and [Parliamentarian Gloucestershire](#). It was held by the Royalists and [besieged](#) in both 1645 and in 1648, eventually falling to the Parliamentary forces on 25 May 1648. A memorial to Sir [Nicholas Kemeys](#), who led the Royalist defence during the [Second Civil war](#) and was killed in combat after refusing to surrender after the castle's fall, lies within the keep.^[8]

After the war, the castle was garrisoned and maintained as an artillery fort and barracks. It was also used as a political prison. Its occupants included Bishop [Jeremy Taylor](#), and – after the [Restoration](#) of the monarchy – [Henry Marten](#), one of the Commissioners who signed the death warrant of [Charles I](#), who was imprisoned here before his own death in 1680.

Decay of the building, and the start of tourism

Chepstow Castle showing the Great Tower, seen from the 1816 Wye Bridge

In 1682, the castle came into the ownership of the [Duke of Beaufort](#). The garrison was disbanded in 1685, and the buildings were partly dismantled, leased to tenants and left to decay. Various parts of the castle were used as a farmyard and a glass factory. By the late 18th century, its ruins became, with other sites in the [Wye valley](#), a "[Picturesque](#)" feature on the "[Wye tour](#)", pleasure boat trips down the river from [Ross-on-Wye](#) via [Monmouth](#). The first guidebook to the castle and town was written by [Charles Heath](#) of [Monmouth](#) and was published in 1793.^[7]

In 1794, [J. M. W. Turner](#) did a painting of the castle, overlooking the river Wye. The painting was sold at auction to [Chepstow Museum](#) on 28 March 2023.

The 19th and 20th centuries

By the 1840s, tourism was continuing to grow, particularly with day trips on [steam ships](#) from [Bristol](#). At the same time, the courtyard of the castle began to be used for local horticultural shows, fêtes, and, increasingly from the 1880s, historical [pageants](#) sanctioned by the Duke of Beaufort. Although he tried to sell the castle in 1899, no buyer could be found.

In 1910/11, the castle and adjoining river bed were the site of well-publicised excavations by Dr. [Orville Ward Owen](#), who was attempting to find secret documents to prove that [Shakespeare](#)'s plays had in fact been written by [Francis Bacon](#).^[10] In 1913, the movie [Ivanhoe](#), starring [King Baggot](#), was made in the grounds. The following year, the castle was bought by businessman [William Royse Lysaght](#), of [Tutshill](#), and conservation work began.

In 1953, the Lysaght family put the castle into the care of the [Ministry of Works](#). In 1977 [Terry Gilliam](#) shot some of his film adaptation of [Lewis Carroll](#)'s "[Jabberwocky](#)" at the castle. During 1984–1986, it was used as one of the locations for [HTV](#)'s [Robin Of Sherwood](#) starring [Michael Praed](#).^[11] Brazilian heavy metal band [Sepultura](#) recorded part of their fifth album [Chaos A.D.](#) in the castle, in 1993.

The castle today

Chepstow Castle is open to the public, and since 1984 has been in the care of [Cadw](#), the [Welsh government](#) body with the responsibility for protecting, conserving and promoting the built heritage of Wales. There are special events held often in the castle and visitors are now able to walk along the battlements and into Marten's Tower. The castle was used for the filming some scenes for the [Doctor Who](#) 50th anniversary broadcast.

A particular thanks goes to Wikipedia for the source of much of the information.