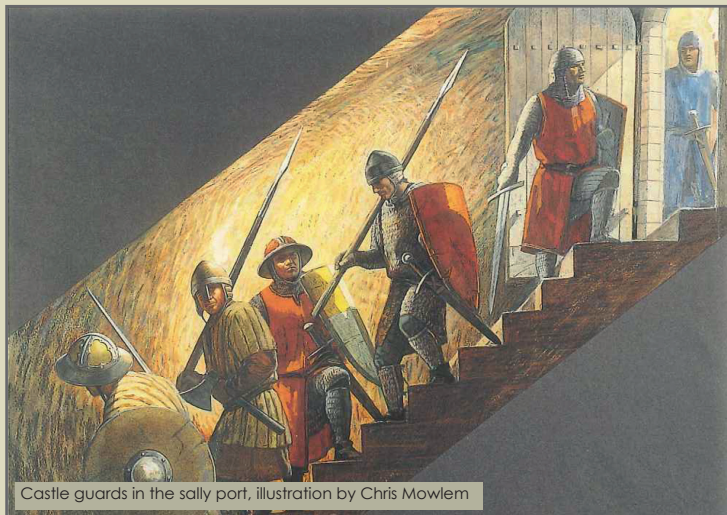


Castle Park

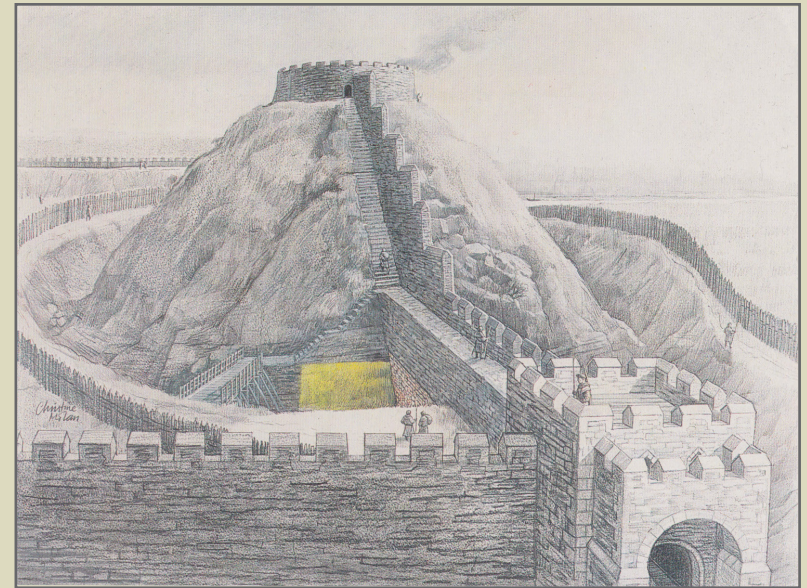
Bristol Castle

Once upon a time, there was a castle, one of the largest castles in the country. Yet all that now survives above ground of Bristol Castle is an arched stone entrance, a remnant of one of the defensive walls, archaeological remains of a tower and steps to an underground route from the castle that would have provided the opportunity for besieged occupiers to carry out a surprise counter-attack or communicate with the outside world.



Castle guards in the sally port, illustration by Chris Mowlem

Long, long ago in 1088, the first mention is made of a castle in Bristol in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The earliest structure was likely of 'motte-and-bailey' design, introduced to England after the Norman invasion of 1066. Though it is possible that the early castle was built of stone, many believe that it was a timber tower (known as a keep) that was built on a raised mound (motte). This earthwork was enclosed by a courtyard (bailey) which was in turn surrounded by a protective ditch and high timber fence.



The Motte and Bailey Castle as it might have looked by Chris Mowlem



One day, in the early 1100s, Robert, First Earl of Gloucester (the eldest, but illegitimate son of Henry I) decided to make some amendments to his castle. The motte was levelled and the keep rebuilt in stone (the remains of which can still be seen today). The defensive ditch was realigned and the castle enclosed within a vast red pennant sandstone wall.



Robert's father, Henry I died in 1135 having named his daughter, Empress Matilda of Anjou as heir. Henry's only legitimate son and heir, William Adelin had died in 1120, but most of the English barons did not want a woman ruling over them so supported Henry's nephew, Stephen of Blois as rightful heir to the English throne. Stephen became King of England, but this uncertainty regarding the royal succession led to civil war and what later became known as 'The Anarchy', part of which was played out in Bristol.

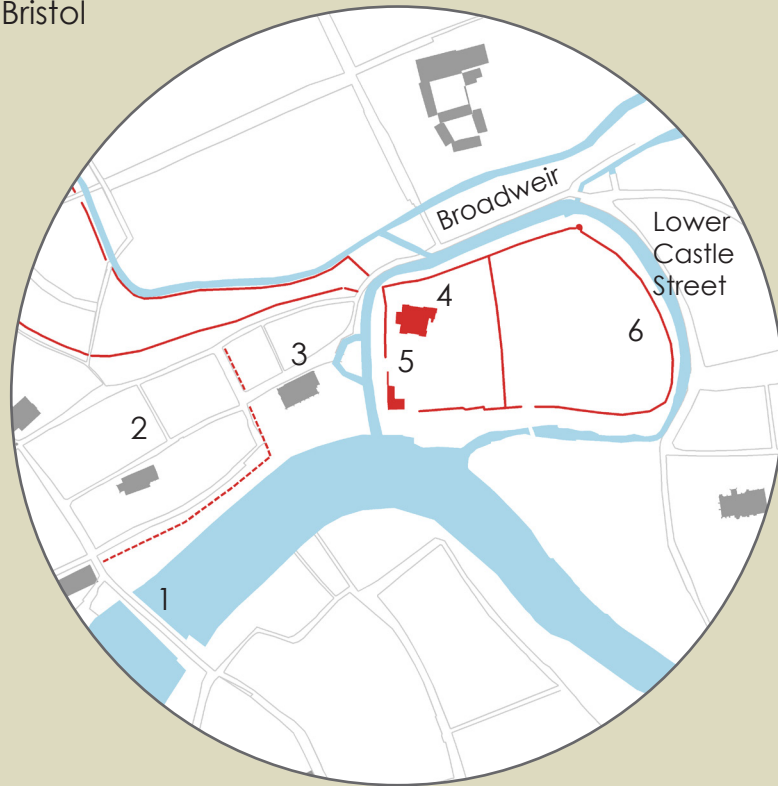
It is important to note for the purposes of our story that Robert of Gloucester was half-brother to Empress Matilda of Anjou. In 1138, Robert withdrew his support for Stephen and declared his allegiance to Empress Matilda triggering a civil war. In the same year, King Stephen attempted to take Bristol, Robert's main stronghold in the southwest, but the castle proved impregnable.

In 1141, King Stephen was imprisoned at Bristol Castle after being captured at the Battle of Lincoln. He was released later that year after Robert was himself captured at the Battle of Winchester and the warring parties agreed to a prisoner exchange.



Effigy of Robert of Gloucester in St James Priory as drawn in George Hollis The Monumental Effigies of Great Britain, 1840

Map of Medieval Bristol



- 1 Bristol Bridge
- 2 St Mary Le Port
- 3 St Peter's Church
- 4 The Keep
- 5 Site of the Sally Port
- 6 The Vaulted Chambers

The civil war continued until the Treaty of Winchester in 1153 that ensured that Matilda's son, Henry would succeed Stephen as king. Stephen died in 1154 and Henry II was crowned King of England.

It was not until 1199 (52 years after the death of Robert, Earl of Gloucester) that Bristol Castle eventually came into royal hands with the accession of King John, having married Robert's granddaughter, Isabella Countess of Gloucester. John divorced Isabel the same year, but he kept Bristol Castle.

During the 1200s a great defended gateway (barbican) was added at the castle's west end, facing towards the then separate town of Bristol.



King Stephen depicted in Matthew Paris's 'Epitome Of Chronicles', 1255

It is not difficult to see that the decision to construct a barbican to face the town could well have been interpreted by the citizens of Bristol as an act of aggression.

During the 'Great Rebellion' of 1312-16, Bristolians erected a wall on Wynchestrete (modern day Wine Street) and shot arrows, crossbow bolts "and other harmful things" into the castle. This dispute continued until the King, Edward II, ordered the town to be besieged and the former Mayor of Bristol and leader of the rebellion, John Le Taverner arrested. In 1316 the town surrendered.



3D reconstruction of the castle by David Martyn based on archaeological and historical evidence

In 1399, Bristol Castle was involved in Henry Bolingbroke's (the future Henry IV) taking of the English throne from Richard II who was out of the country in Ireland at the time. Henry marched to Bristol supported by Thomas, Lord Berkeley to lay siege to the castle.

The garrison were offered safe passage if they surrendered the castle which they did without a conflict, though the leaders were tried before an unofficial 'kangaroo court' and probably without good evidence, were all found guilty and executed.

The castle remained happily ever after until the 1650s, when the keep and most of the castle structures were demolished and the whole castle precinct redeveloped. But that is another story that you can read about in the Post Medieval leaflet.

Further information available at
www.locallearning.org.uk/castle-park/

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