Neath Castle for www.historypoints.org

The Castle

Neath castle is roughly "D" shaped- the straight edge running parallel with the River Nedd. This provided the defences with a natural moat, enabling ships to tie up and deliver supplies under the shelter of the walls. The riverside wall contained a small gate from which steps led down to a quay at the river's edge. The castle was dominated by the massive gatehouse which commanded the western defences. The gatehouse consisted of a pair of rounded towers, the NW tower being built upon the remains of a tower that had been previously demolished. Between the towers was the main gate. This was entered over a drawbridge, which when raised was protected by a deep pit. Behind the drawbridge was the portcullis.

Situated on the northern riverside wall was a garderobe block, which served the occupants as a toilet facility. A second garderobe was located next to the large "D" shaped tower that defended the north-eastern corner. From here a curtain wall curved around in a semi-circle to link up with the gatehouse. Internal structures consisted of a number of buildings around a central courtyard. A brewhouse, a bakehouse and a kitchen have all been identified.

History of Neath Castle

When the Normans first arrived in the Vale of Neath they constructed a motte, or fortified mound, on the west bank of the river, near the site of the later abbey. The location of this first castle has never been found, although several sites have been suggested.

Its construction was begun by Robert, Earl of Gloucester, the nominal Lord of Glamorgan, at a date estimated between 1114 and 1130. It is also referred to as "Granville's Castle" after Richard I de Grenville, Lord of Neath who has also been credited with its construction. The town of Neath takes its Welsh name, "Castell-nedd", from the castle.

By 1185 a castle of earth and timber had been built on the present site. It was attacked by the Welsh on several occasions and was largely destroyed in an assault in 1231. Following this, a stone castle was constructed, but this was destroyed when the Welsh attacked the castle and slaughtered its garrison in 1234.

In 1258 another attack took place, when most of the town that had grown up around the castle was destroyed. Further fortification was added and the defences improved in the form of a powerful gatehouse with twin towers on the western defences. A large "D" shaped tower was built on the opposite wall. It is this configuration that remains today.

Edward I visited Neath castle on a tour of South Wales in 1284.

In 1299, Gilbert de Clare, built the present castle. He also appointed a Constable of Neath Castle (a post held by the Mayor of Neath today)with a garrison of four professional soldiers and eight crossbowmen.

The castle was held by the powerful Despenser family during the revolt of the barons against Edward II, and was attacked in 1322 by the forces of the Earl of Hereford when it

was considerably damaged. Edward II himself took refuge here before his capture and gruesome death in 1327.

Repair work followed, but by then the age of the castle had passed. It is recorded that in 1404 the castle was still viable but succeeding centuries saw it abandoned as a habitation and became a source of building stone for the developing town. During the 18th century a cock-pit was dug in the central court-yard, and stone tiers were provided as seating for spectators of the barbaric sport that took place here. After years of neglect and stone-robbing, what was left of the castle was saved by recent preservation work carried out for Neath Community Council. What remains of the castle is designated a Grade II* listed building.

www.neathtowncouncil.gov.uk for opening times and further information on the historic town of Neath.

General Outline Plan of Castle

1. NW Tower
2. Garderobe Blocks
3. NE Tower
4. Internal Buildings
5. 18th Century Breach in Wall
6. Curtain Wall
7. SW Tower
8. Town Wall
9. Drawbridge pit
10. Courtyard
11. 18 th Century Cock Pit