

Would Neath Castle make a good stronghold?

The castles, with their defence walls and tall towers, have always stimulated imagination. The subject of the castle is always associated with legends of ghosts, hidden treasures, or secret, underground passages. Such curiosity and fantasy are not only encouraged by documentaries but also by fantasy movies. A theme of splendour, elaborately decorated chambers, long expanses of corridors or grand courtyards, elevating the buildings to the status of something almost magical. In reality, during the Middle Ages, these castles were mostly used for military purposes. They served as strongholds with the goal of repelling the attacker. It is true, that throughout Europe the stone remains of the castles consist mostly of parts of walls and often ruined towers, which can further awaken the imagination, as the visitors frequently do not face completed structures but only its fragments. Furthermore, other, frequently renovated, conserved or outright reconstructed castles are buildings of high importance due to the tradition – either because they used to serve an important purpose or because someone made the effort to take care of them over extended periods of time, until today, when their conservation became safeguarded by the law.¹ But those are the castles that during the Renaissance or even Middle Ages were transformed into residences and lost their strategic meaning, only serving to induce awe. As a result of this, the potential castle enthusiast faces either ruins or Renaissance or baroque residences, whose interior does not resemble a military base at all. It may be due to such a contrast – raw exterior and rich interior – that these castles gather more attention than fortifications and strongholds, citadels or bunkers. At the same time, aside from their cultural and traditional values, these castles lost their military meaning and stopped being built as the artillery became widespread.

Wales is known throughout Europe for the vast amount of castles within its borders. Almost all of those castles, whether in a state of ruin or well-kept are of English origin. A major factor in such a state of things was King Edward I, who not only ordered the construction of new but also renovations of old fortifications. It was due to the influence of this English King that the Iron Ring was constructed,² together with the Caernarfon Castle in Gwynedd, at the forefront.³ The construction took place at the end of XIII century C.E.,⁴ the entire undertaking was extremely expensive.⁵ Worldwide famous, nowadays, Welsh castles were meant to defend against the Welsh themselves. In the period of XII to the beginning of the XV century C.E. England was engaged in multiple conflicts, with its focus being strongly directed at the Welsh fighting for their independence.⁶ The castles were built with this in mind. Crucial in this case was their psychological aspect – towering over everything, massive stone constructions suggested might and strength of spirit of the English and their dominance over the surrounding areas. Reconstructed or conserved castles to this day continue to amaze, even though our technology progressed much further over the many hundreds of years, therefore it may be assumed that they had similar effect on people many centuries ago.

¹ Welsh Government, "Key Legislation: Historic Environment," *Law Wales*, <<https://law.gov.wales/key-legislation-historic-environment>> [accessed 8 May 2025].

² Mark Milligan, HeritageDaily, *Edward Longshank's Iron Ring of Castles*, 15 April 2021, <<https://www.heritagedaily.com/2021/04/edward-longshanks-iron-ring-of-castles/138718>> [accessed 8 May 2025].

³ Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Caernarfon*, Britannica, <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Caernarfon>> [accessed 8 May 2025].

⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Caernarfon*.

⁵ Mark Milligan, HeritageDaily, *Edward Longshank's Iron Ring of Castles*.

⁶ Ibid.



Neath Castle⁷

In this context, the Neath Castle stands out as an intriguing example, having never had the chance of being discovered in all its richness, falling victim to the relentless passage of time. The castle was abandoned in the XVIII century and left to deteriorate by itself, ultimately ending up in ruin.⁸ The placement and the current shape of the ruins are vastly credited to Gilbert de Clare – Earl of Gloucester and his son Richard.⁹ Albeit, the archaeological excavations were done in 1950 point to the fact that the history of the fortifications of the modern Neath reaches as far back as Roman times – that is around the year 75 C.E.,¹⁰ but those constructions were made of wood and did not last to this day and there is a limited amount of knowledge about the original, Roman construction.¹¹ The official sources state, that the castle was built by Richard de Granville in 1130 C.E., when Richard funded the nearby Abbey as well,¹² the castle at the time was located on the other side of the river and was made of wood, therefore this also can not be considered the construction date of the discussed castle.¹³ What is called the Neath Castle, is a stone-based construction made by the previously mentioned, Richard de Clare around the year 1234 C.E.¹⁴, after the time when his father moved the then-wooden fortification onto the east side of the river.¹⁵ Initially wooden, but then reinforced by stone, construction was attacked and destroyed many times by the Welsh in the beginning and middle of the XIII century C.E.¹⁶ In year 1284 C.E.

⁷ Robert Pawlikowski, *Neath Castle*, photography, 4 January 2025.

⁸ UK Southwest, *Neath Castle*, <<https://www.uksouthwest.net/neath-port-talbot/neath-castle/>> [accessed 8 May 2025].

⁹ UK Southwest, *Neath Castle*.

¹⁰ Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Neath, Wales*, Britannica, <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Neath-Wales>> [accessed 8 May 2025].

¹¹ UK Southwest, *Neath Castle*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ HistoryPoints, *Remains of Neath Castle, Neath*, <<https://historypoints.org/index.php?page=remains-of-neath-castle-neath>> [accessed 8 May 2025].

¹⁵ UK Southwest, *Neath Castle*.

¹⁶ HistoryPoints, *Remains of Neath Castle, Neath*, <<https://historypoints.org/index.php?page=remains-of-neath-castle-neath>> [accessed 8 May 2025].

King Edward I ordered the Neath Castle to be rebuilt,¹⁷ which was completed by the end of the XIII century C.E. It was also then that the twin castle towers, together with the ornamental entrance, that we can admire today, were made.¹⁸



Neath Castle Twin Towers¹⁹



Neath Castle The Gate²⁰

neath> [accessed 8 May 2025].

¹⁷ HistoryPoints, *Remains of Neath Castle, Neath*.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Robert Pawlikowski, *Neath Castle Twin Towers*, photography, 4 January 2025.

The political situation begun to change during the reign of King Edward I. In 1282 C.E. The Dafydd ap Gruffydd's uprising took place, which due to Llywelyn ap Gruffydd led to a war with England.²¹ In 1283 Dafydd was executed, and at that point, Llywelyn had already perished during the battle of Orewin Bridge.²² King Edward I made a decision regarding the construction of the previously mentioned Iron Ring, consisting of 10 completed fortifications over the area of North Wales. Taking into account the multitude of attacks performed by the Welsh who at that point were fighting for their independence, when in 1258 C.E. Llywelyn ap Gruffydd plundered the entire city, the decision to build a fortification in Neath was justified. Although as it happened the end of the XIII century brought the end to a period of serious wars with Wales and Welsh uprisings, and the castle Neath, at its best, never had the chance of proving its worth in what it was created for.

Further to this, the Castle participated in the Baron War, during the reign of King Edward II,²³ but those were skirmishes of internal English conflicts. In reality, the castle became a residence and a representation of titles and power, and was subsequently renovated up until the decision was made to abandon it, when compared to more modern living arrangements the castle simply could not win.

Without the necessity of referencing the chronicles, which only contain a minimal amount of information,²⁴ but through analysis, it is quite obvious that the Welsh armies of those times could not be armed with advanced technologies or well-equipped. They mostly consisted of infantry, equipped with bows and arrows, as well as other objects that could be used as a weapon.²⁵ The subject of armament is worth bringing a focus to for a moment, as it is quite important. Wales during the times of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd was a small country, cut off from potential allies and quite frankly, civilisations, as from the East and potentially South, Wales was surrounded by England and from the North and West it was surrounded by the Sea. Furthermore, it was considered and treated by the English as a vassal state. In the end, gathering more armaments was either very hard or nearly impossible. The Welsh did not have anyone to purchase it from, and making weaponry was restricted to what was available on hand. During the Middle Ages, knights of almost all of the European countries were equipped with armour, helmets or well-forged swords. Such equipment was not readily available, as for obvious reasons the Welsh could not supply themselves in English forges and armourers' shops. Armoured Welshmen were considered enemies. Thus, the Welsh were forced to arm themselves with agricultural tools such as flails, sickles and knives. Arrowheads and spearheads could be made more easily and quickly, as forging an armour or a sword required not only well well-prepared and equipped workshop, but also extensive knowledge. Taking into account such poor equipment it is easy to assume that conquest of a castle is nearly impossible, nevertheless, even the Caernarfon was temporarily taken by the Welsh in 1294 C.E., even if only for a short while.

From a military and strategic perspective, the grandeur of the construction remained imperative, so that even its size would serve as a deterrent for the potential opponents. Generally speaking, the military usefulness of the castle was decided by a few factors, ones that can be easily pointed out by an average tourist who would decide such a medieval structure. It does not require extensive knowledge of history or complicated archaeological research. The ease with which such military features could be pointed out may be due to the general knowledge, that during the Middle Ages technology was not advanced. Complicated siege engines were, of course, being built

²⁰ Robert Pawlikowski, *Neath Castle The Gate*, photography, 4 January 2025.

²¹ Mark Milligan, HeritageDaily, *Edward Longshank's Iron Ring of Castles*, 15 April 2021, <<https://www.heritagedaily.com/2021/04/edward-longshanks-iron-ring-of-castles/138718>> [accessed 8 May 2025].

²² Mark Milligan, HeritageDaily, *Edward Longshank's Iron Ring of Castles*.

²³ HistoryPoints, *Remains of Neath Castle, Neath*, <<https://historypoints.org/index.php?page=remains-of-neath-castle-neath>> [accessed 8 May 2025].

²⁴ Regia Anglorum, *The Welsh Wars*, <<https://regia.org/research/warfare/welswar.htm>> [accessed 8 May 2025].

²⁵ Regia Anglorum, *The Welsh Wars*.

even during the Roman times, but the knowledge of how to build such things was not common, just as it is a general knowledge that back then literacy was not widespread. An average tourist can easily put himself in the shoes of an infantry soldier, equipped only with a hammer as his best weapon, whose survival in the siege would be decided by how quickly he can climb the ladder. Moreover, it is important to recognise that the architectural design of castles as military strongholds in the medieval period exhibits a consistent pattern throughout Europe.

What, then, proved to be of crucial significance? Among the most important factors was the location of the castle. The castle constructed upon an elevation, or even directly on a rocky outcrop, offered a considerable advantage in terms of defence. Similarly, it was easier to defend a castle if even one of its sides was protected by a natural body of water, such as a river or a lake. The thickness and height of the outer walls remained a matter of crucial importance, as it was not only a psychological matter, but also technical – high walls were harder to climb, and the thicker they were, the harder they were to tear down. Therefore, the incorporation of a fire-resistant stone into castle construction was a factor of great importance. Furthermore, defensive elements, such as the moat – which did not have to be filled with water – and, above all, the towers, played a significant role.

The towers, which today are appreciated mostly for their aesthetic value, were, in fact, the most important element of the castle back then. It was from the castle tower that defenders attacked the approaching enemies. In the event that the outer walls were breached, the tower could ultimately determine the survival of those within the castle. Access to the top of the tower led through a deliberately narrow and winding passage, where the number of the attackers mattered less, as they would be forced into a single file and had to fight behind their comrades.

Although ultimately only ruins remain, it is possible to ascertain that the Neath Castle in its ultimate form was built in a „D” shape.

On one side it was protected by the river, which only later changed its course.²⁶ Taking into account that previous successful Welsh attacks on the wooden fortress and the decision to relocate it to the opposite side of the river during the subsequent reconstruction of the castle out of stone, it may be easily deduced that it was a deliberate strategic decision, based on an analysis of the earlier Welsh attack methods. The castle had a deep moat.²⁷ A small garrison, consisting of 8 archers and 4 foot soldiers was assigned to defend the castle,²⁸ taking into account, that the castle was rebuilt with four round towers, it can be concluded that the English were quite confident in the new stone structure. The reconstruction of the castle in a new form coincides in time with the construction of the Iron Ring in northern Wales, the designs for which were made by Master Architect James of Saint George.²⁹ Even King Edward I seemed fascinated by the medieval fortresses, who not only decided upon the construction of enormous and expensive structures in northern Wales, but it was also his desire to conquer the Edinburgh Castle,³⁰ which require a lot of his effort. At the same time, Gilbert de Clare was his great ally, therefore it can be understood that the new form of the Castle in Neath was analysed and consulted between them in-depth. Equipped with everything a fortress back then could potentially be, the Castle in Neath would fulfil its purpose and defend itself from the next siege by the Welsh, at least until the English reinforcement would arrive, but such assaults against Neath Castle never again took place and therefore such a thesis can not be ultimately proven.

²⁶ HistoryPoints, *Remains of Neath Castle, Neath*, <<https://historypoints.org/index.php?page=remains-of-neath-castle-neath>> [accessed 8 May 2025].

²⁷ UK Southwest, *Neath Castle*, <<https://www.uksouthwest.net/neath-port-talbot/neath-castle/>> [accessed 8 May 2025].

²⁸ HistoryPoints, *Remains of Neath Castle, Neath*.

²⁹ Mark Milligan, *Edward Longshank's Iron Ring of Castles*, HeritageDaily, 15 April 2021, <<https://www.heritagedaily.com/2021/04/edward-longshanks-iron-ring-of-castles/138718>> [accessed 8 May 2025].

³⁰ Edinburgh History, *Edinburgh Castle History 1296*, <<http://www.edinburgh-history.co.uk/castle-history-1296.html>> [accessed 8 May 2025]

Bibliography:

Brief History, *A Brief History Of Edward Longshanks - Edward I Of England*, online video recording, YouTube, 22 September 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rzMeyJUZMI>> [accessed 8 May 2025]

Edinburgh History, Edinburgh Castle History 1296, <<http://www.edinburgh-history.co.uk/castle-history-1296.html>> [accessed 8 May 2025]

Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Caernarfon*, Britannica, <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Caernarfon>> [accessed 8 May 2025]

Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Neath, Wales*, Britannica, <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Neath-Wales>> [accessed 8 May 2025]

Epic History, *3D Guide - How To Build The Perfect Medieval Castl*, online video recording, YouTube, 4 September 2020, <<https://youtu.be/Syig6PHYFBo?si=be2C43CJNPRZIBu1>> [accessed 8 May 2025]

HistoryPoints, *Remains of Neath Castle, Neath*, <<https://historypoints.org/index.php?page=remains-of-neath-castle-neath>> [accessed 8 May 2025]

History Hit, *The Welsh Castles of Edward I*, online video recording, YouTube, 27 October 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjOO0uuP4_o> [accessed 8 May 2025]

King, Andy, and Andrew M. Spencer, eds., *Edward I: New Interpretations* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, York Medieval Press, 2020), <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvnwbzrz>>

Milligan, Mark, *Edward Longshank's Iron Ring of Castles*, HeritageDaily, 15 April 2021, <<https://www.heritedaily.com/2021/04/edward-longshanks-iron-ring-of-castles/138718>> [accessed 8 May 2025]

Pawlikowski, Robert, *Neath Castle*, photography, 4 January 2025.

Pawlikowski, Robert, *Neath Castle The Gate*, photography, 4 January 2025

Pawlikowski, Robert, *Neath Castle Twin Towers*, photography, 4 January 2025

Progress - Science Documentaries, *Can Modern People Build A Medieval Castle*, online video recording, YouTube, 11 December 2022 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnxARVtn6m0>> [accessed 8 May 2025]

Regia Anglorum, *The Welsh Wars*, <<https://regia.org/research/warfare/welswar.htm>> [accessed 8 May 2025]

Secrets of Great British Castles, dir. by Gillian Bancroft, Edward Hart, and Michael Waterhouse, 2 seasons (Amazon Prime Video, 2015–2016) <<https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B0B8MD9QBL/>> [accessed 10 May 2025]

Shadiversity, *How were castles built / constructed in the medieval period?* online video recording, YouTube, 27 July 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pu3O70GeQFY>> [accessed 8 May 2025]

UK Government, "Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990", *UK Public General Acts*, 1990, <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/9/contents>> [accessed 8 May 2025]

UK Southwest, *Neath Castle*, <<https://www.uksouthwest.net/neath-port-talbot/neath-castle/>> [accessed 8 May 2025]

Welsh Government, "Key Legislation: Historic Environment," *Law Wales*,
<<https://law.gov.wales/key-legislation-historic-environment>> [accessed 8 May 2025]