

Press Release

Plymouth Castle and Barbican Rediscovered

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Mallory Haas, Director, The SHIPS Project CIC, Plymouth, UK

Many people in Plymouth, England, knew that the town once had a Castle somewhere near the Barbican, but where it was and what it looked like was a mystery, as nothing of it survives today. A new book, based on original research by Plymouth archaeologist and author Peter Holt, reveals the location of the Castle and shows what it once looked like using 3D computer-generated illustrations by Chris Harvey.

The story started in the summer of 2023 when Peter was shown a map from 1840 that included the location of a stone tower near the West Pier in the Barbican. The tower looked the right size to be a remnant of the castle, but it was in the wrong place. Research using old documents and maps in archives provided clues about the early defences of Plymouth, and more hints were found about the location of the castle in the layout of alleys around the harbour. Researching the story of Plymouth's early defences is challenging as only a few documents exist from that time, as most of Plymouth's records were destroyed during an uprising in 1549.

Plymouth began as a small fishing village, but around 750 years ago, when Edward I was King of England, it became rich from the trade in wine, cloth and tin. The wealthy town was now a target for raids by enemy ships, so defences were built to keep these ships from entering the harbour of Sutton Pool. The first defences to be built were a small, fortified building called the Barbican Blockhouse and a Chain Tower opposite, with a chain slung between them that could be raised to stop enemy ships entering the harbour. Close to the Blockhouse on the western side was a small fort with a single stone tower built to defend the harbour.

The Hundred Years' War against France began in 1337, and just two years later Plymouth was attacked, and the town was destroyed. In 1377, the town was again attacked and burnt by the French, and the townspeople realised that they needed stronger defences, so construction of the larger Castle Quadrade was begun. The castle had not been completed by the time the next raids occurred in 1400 and 1403, and the enemy forces managed to destroy part of the castle before they left. The Castle wasn't completed until 1450, just before the end of the Hundred Years' War and the end of the raids on Plymouth. The castle was the main defence of Sutton Pool until 1597 when it was superseded by a Fort built on the Hoe, and the castle was deliberately demolished in 1667 when the Royal Citadel was constructed.

The new book 'Plymouth Castle and Barbican Rediscovered' is published by The SHIPS Project and can be ordered through their website shipsproject.org. The team have also created a 12-page booklet and website that explain the story of the Castle and Barbican. Mallory Haas, archaeologist and SHIPS Director, is leading guided tours of the Castle site, showing the layout of the Castle, Barbican and Fort and identifying the remains of these structures on Lambhay Hill.

For more information, please visit: shipsproject.org/castle

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Author: Peter Holt

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Contact

Mallory Haas, Director, The SHIPS Project CIC, Plymouth, UK

mallory@3hconsulting.com

07813 018588

www.shipsproject.org