

Exeter Castle

Despite its checkered history, Exeter preserves many relics of its medieval past. Even its city wall has managed to survive for the most part and the bombing revealed stretches, which had been concealed behind houses for centuries. It is nearly two miles long, but with frequent small gaps and little parapet to walk along it is not a particularly rewarding circuit.

The Roman and medieval city occupied a near-rectangular area, today bounded by Northernhay, Eastgate, Southernhay and West Street. Like most other Romano-British cities, Exeter was first enclosed by a stonewall in the third century. The Roman plinth and regularly coursed masonry can be seen in many places - it is unusual for so much Roman work to survive.

The castle of Exeter, often called Rougemont Castle from the red sandstone knell on which it was built, occupies the northern corner of the city's defenses. William I founded it straight after the capitulation. The square bailey is protected by the city wall on two sides. Towards the town there is a strong rampart topped by the ruins of a curtain. Towers mark the junctions between the city wall and the curtain wall and there is a half-round bastion, Athelstan's Tower, on the northeast wall.

Herringbone masonry is visible in places and the well-preserved gatehouse is almost certainly a relic of the Conqueror's time. Two triangular-headed windows above the blocked outer archway and another facing the bailey indicate its antiquity. They suggest Anglo-Saxon work, the only plausible explanation being that English masons were employed and continued to build in their traditional style.

The short barbican, with its tall arch, is contemporary with the rest of the gatehouse and thus the oldest in England. Exeter is one of those early Norman castles which put the emphasis upon a strong gatehouse instead of a keep.