

Southampton Castle

One of the chief ports of medieval England, Southampton preserves a wealth of medieval domestic architecture. Its flourishing Dark Age predecessor was abandoned in favor of the present site in the tenth century, and excavations have shown that this new town had earth and timber defenses from the beginning, no doubt as a defense against the Danes.

Over a mile in length, the walled circuit enclosed a roughly rectangular area. It had numerous bastions, mostly semi-circular, and larger towers at the angles. Today, only the wall survives, along with parts of the north wall and a length near the southeast corner of the circuit. A tour of the wall may conveniently begin at the Bargate, the northern entrance to the old town and a very imposing one. The machicolated front is an early fifteenth century addition.

Behind it are twin half-round towers a century or so older, while the gate passage retains a Norman archway from an older structure. In contrast with the fortress-like outer face, the side facing the town has large windows lighting the story above the gate. This spacious chamber served as the guildhall in medieval times and later civic uses saved the gatehouse from demolition in later centuries. It was a major obstruction to traffic until the construction of a bypass in the 1930s, which relieved the problem but resulted in the destruction of the stretches of town wall on either side.

Beyond the Bargate, the wall leads west to the circular Arundel Tower, then southward to the old quay. Shortly a kink in the circuit denotes the junction with the older castle wall. Southampton Castle was a royal stronghold first mentioned in the 1180s. Richard I and John rebuilt it in stone. The west curtain survives as the town wall, with a postern leading into a cellar from the castle's domestic buildings.