

St. Briavels Castle

St, Briavels Castle occupies an elevated site overlooking the Wye Valley and the Welsh Border. Niles Fitz Walter, Earl of Gloucester, first built the castle during the Anarchy, but Henry II took possession in 1160 and it remained a royal stronghold thereafter. Kings, especially John, came here to hunt in the Forest of Dean. It between times, it served as the administrative center of the forest, which was important for iron forges, and the castle became a stone house for the innumerable crossbow bolts made there.

A massive gate house dominates the castle, Built by Edward I in 1292, it must have been a good example of the keep gate house theme and a worthy counterpart to the gatehouses of Edward's Welsh castles. The effect is marred now by the loss of the parapet, long since displaced by pitched roofs, and the destruction of one side of the long gate passage.

Semi-circular flanking towers rise from square bases which retreat back into the wall as short pyramidal spurs. This strengthening of the wall portcullises closed the gate passage, and smaller portcullises even barred the doorways leading into the porter's lodges. Beneath one of these lodges is a pit prison, and later the entire gatehouse served as a prison for those who had fallen foul of the harsh forest laws. Originally, however, the two upper floors of the gate house contained a hall and other apartments for the constable.

The gatehouse forms one end of the present house, which originated as a suite of royal apartments. Though much altered in the Jacobean period and later, the house preserves a lot of masonry from King John's time, notably a reset fireplace in the so-called Jury Room. An altered chapel projects into the bailey, but the hall that stood opposite has vanished.