

Wolvesey Castle

As the capital of the kings of Wessex, who brought the whole of England under their sway in the tenth century, Winchester enjoyed the status of capital long into the Norman period, though eventually the pull of London proved too strong. It is therefore inevitable that William I should have founded a castle here soon after the Norman Conquest.

The castle occupied a curiously elongated site on high ground at the western edge of the walled city. It received stone buildings in the twelfth century but much restoration was necessary following the city's capture by Dauphin Louis in 1216. The early history of the castle is confused because a royal palace with another Norman keep stood near the cathedral. It existed until 1411. During those troubled years, Henry partially fortified his own palace, which occupied the southeast corner of the city, counter-balancing the royal castle on the west.

Wolvesey Palace, often called Wolvesey Castle, remained the chief seat of the bishops throughout the Middle Ages. It was finally abandoned in 1684, by Bishop Morley, who built the present Baroque palace alongside. The fine chapel is incorporated, but the rest of the old palace is very much a ruin.

On the south, there is a definite curtain wall entered through a sequence of gateways. Henry went on to build two square towers against the eastern hall block, creating an illusion of strength on this side. It is an illusion, for despite the circumstances of its origin, Wolvesey's defenses are really more for show than anything else. The so-called keep is really just a symbolic imitation of a keep as it housed a vast kitchen, and the smaller Wymond's Tower served as a latrine block for the adjoining solar. The gatehouse on the north side of the court was erected following Henry's return from exile in 1158.