

A Tour of Monmouthshire's Castles Part One: Heritage, Intrigue, and Architectural Splendour

Monmouthshire, situated in the heart of Wales, stands as a testament to the country's title as the "castle capital of the world." With hundreds of fortresses scattered across its landscape, the county is a rich tapestry of history, conflict, and legacy. In the first instalment of this two-part series, Chronicle reporter Tim Butters explores five of Monmouthshire's most compelling castles Abergavenny, Raglan, Caldicot, Usk, and Clytha each offering a unique glimpse into the past.

Abergavenny Castle is perhaps one of Wales's most notorious fortresses. While its ruins today suggest quietude, the site was once the backdrop to a grim chapter in medieval history. In 1175, Norman lord William de Braose orchestrated a brutal massacre of Welsh chieftains under the guise of diplomacy. The legacy of this betrayal continues to define the castle's place in Welsh folklore and underscores the turbulent relationship between native leaders and Norman invaders.

In contrast, Raglan Castle represents a different kind of power: refined, regal, and architecturally ambitious. Constructed in the 15th century, Raglan was designed as much for splendour as for strength. Its hexagonal tower, elaborate stonework, and grand court reflect a period of prosperity and artistic expression. The castle's siege during the English Civil War marked its decline, but its remains continue to impress and inspire.

Caldicot Castle offers a more measured historical narrative. Originally a Norman fortification, it was later transformed into a stately home, most notably by Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester. Today, it functions as a public heritage site set within 55 acres of landscaped parkland, seamlessly blending history with community engagement and education.

More secluded but no less significant, Usk Castle is a lesser-known treasure. Tucked behind a modern garden centre, this medieval stronghold features ivy-covered ruins and panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. Though modest in scale, Usk captures the quiet resilience of Welsh castles that have survived centuries of change.

Completing the tour is Clytha Castle, an 18th-century Gothic folly with no military history but considerable emotional depth. Built by William Jones in memory of his late wife, the structure stands as a romantic and architectural landmark. Its elevated position offers sweeping views of the Black Mountains, providing visitors with both reflection and reverence.

As we continue this exploration in part two, more castles await each with their own stories carved into stone, waiting to be rediscovered.