Camping and castles...

Musician and journalist Becki Biggins whisks us away on an exhilarating road trip in a campervan, exploring her favourite Cadw monuments.

A mum of two boys, a passionate Cadw member and an avid camper, Becki captures the magic and history of Castell Coch and Caerphilly and Chepstow castles in south Wales during an unforgettable three-day family adventure.

At the age of six, nearly seven, I fell in love with camping. It was all I could think about, which was odd because, at that time, I'd never been camping in my life. I was desperate for my own tent and, on my seventh birthday, I received a beautiful (in my eyes), three-man dome tent. That tent went with me everywhere, until I upgraded to a five-man dome tent with a porch, which was tall enough to stand up in — luxury!

But, for the last decade, I've been lucky enough to make use of a succession of campervans and motorhomes, which have grown along with my family — my husband, Andy, and our sons Archie, age 10, and Hunter, age 8. The children started camping before they could walk, and we've taken trips to music festivals, camped through France, woken up in the Sahara Desert in Morocco, and travelled all over the UK.

My favourite trips are those where we can explore the heritage of a place, get to know it from its bare bones and stay closer to nature than even the remotest hotel allows. I've been a member of Cadw for several years and that membership has allowed me to explore some of the country's most beautiful and historic sites, including castles — another love of mine from an early age.

Left

Becki Biggins pictured with her sons at Caerphilly Castle. The castle-loving family embarked on a three-day adventure, visiting Castell Coch and Caerphilly and Chepstow castles along the way. © Becki Biggins

Above

Becki was struck by Castell Coch's conical roofs and towering walls, nestled in the wooded landscape of Fforest Fawr.

The idea of a castle-visiting road trip was born when I asked the boys my perennial summer holiday question — 'What adventures do you want to have this summer?' Answers ranged from 'clip n' climb' and 'wild swimming', to 'eating ice-cream' and 'climbing a mountain'! This year they included camping and visiting castles and so I began planning almost immediately.

We decided to stay close to home, to reduce travel time and increase our holiday time; plus, I think we're all guilty of travelling for hours to see faraway sights when there are beautiful places to visit on our doorsteps.

As we live on the Welsh border, Chepstow Castle was a must. Everyone was keen to revisit Castell Coch, the so-called 'fairytale castle', so it became part of the trip along with Caerphilly Castle — one gem I've not had the pleasure of visiting in a long time. Caerphilly is near Castell Coch in south Wales, and just off the M4, which meant we were able to base ourselves at one campsite for the whole trip and visit Chepstow on the way home. We had a plan!

Day 1: Castell Coch

We packed the van the night before and were up early to drive straight to Castell Coch, perched on a hillside overlooking the Taff gorge. As we visited the castle just last year, I knew that the approach to, and parking at, the castle was no problem for the campervan, and so we arrived and parked with ease.

If you've never been to Castell Coch, believe me when I tell you it's something special! The earliest fortification built on the picturesque hillside was an earthen motte, later reinforced with masonry and crowned with a stone shell keep. Three towers were added by the Clare family from the middle of the thirteenth century, but the castle was destroyed soon after in the Welsh rebellions of the early fourteenth century.

In 1848, the third marquess of Bute, John Patrick Crichton-Stuart, inherited a fortune derived from the industrial growth of south Wales, including a vast estate in south Wales — of which Castell Coch, Caerphilly Castle and Cardiff Castle were part. The immensely wealthy marquess was fascinated by the Middle Ages and, in 1875, he tasked his architect, William Burges, to raise a new fortress on the medieval foundations of Castell Coch.

Initially, the most striking thing about the castle is the way the towers rise from the trees that cover the hillside. We're so used to seeing ruined towers and turrets, that to come across intact towers with conical roofs requires a double-take to confirm their existence. The second thing that amazes you is the height of the walls!

The gatehouse — complete with working portcullis, at least in Bute's day — was designed to appear imposing and fulfils its brief with aplomb, but venture further inside and you might be surprised by the sight that greets you.

The courtyard is, in juxtaposition, quite cosy! You can imagine a family, albeit a very rich and powerful one, feeling right at home within these red sandstone walls which, incidentally, gave the Red Castle its name.

Upon entering the castle, we first arrived at the banqueting hall, with its plastered walls covered in stencilled designs, and its vaulted wooden ceiling, again decorated beautifully and theatrically. An enormous chimneypiece, the focal point of the hall, features a stone statue of St Lucius, believed to be the first Christian king of Britain.

With two lively boys in tow, it was tricky to spend as much time as I'd like in any of the rooms, but happily all three of us were kept informed and enthralled by the

Top

The compact courtyard of Castell Coch, overlooked by its three great round towers.

Above

A chimneypiece adorned with a statue of St Lucius dominates the banqueting hall.

free audio guides given to each of us when we entered the castle. There's an option to hear more, or the guide will direct you to the next place of interest on the tour. For those keen to visit the highlights, a helpful single-page map was also handed to us (and quickly commandeered by Archie, who loves a map), detailing an all-encompassing route.

The audio guide takes you through the family's stunning rooms, all designed around themes of nature by Burges and executed with painstaking attention to detail. While I loved the intricacies of Lady Bute's bedroom and the drawing room ceiling, the boys were entertained by the children's activities in the Well Tower — the opportunity to build a 3D model of the castle, create your own stencilled wall designs, and a hands-on boiler room, where visitors can 'repair' the pipes between the boiler and radiators — just the job for two very physical boys!

As with many historic buildings, Castell Coch needs plenty of care and attention to keep it in good order. Cadw are currently working away on the Well Tower — right now clad in scaffolding which is covered with the most beautiful mural — remedying problems caused by water ingress. Details of this careful restoration work can be found all over the castle and, despite the scaffolding not exactly adding to the aesthetic, it's nice to know that Cadw is using our membership fees to take care of these beautiful places.

Day 2: Caerphilly Castle

Caerphilly is a busy town and popular with visitors in the summer, meaning that parking is at a premium. As I knew I wanted to bring the campervan as close to the castle as possible, I researched car parks that could admit larger vehicles, firstly by visiting the Cadw website, and then exploring parking options online. I settled on the Crescent Road car park, which has short- and long-stay parking and can accommodate larger vehicles, and strolled through Dafydd Williams Gardens to reach the castle.

At first glance, Caerphilly Castle is formidable. It is, after all, one of the great castles of medieval Western Europe, combining imposing towers and water defences with a seat of great power.

The castle was begun in 1268 by the Clare family, as a military message to the prince of Wales, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, who was growing in power. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, the castle was adapted into a comfortable home, including well-appointed apartments for Gilbert de Clare, and the conversion of rooms in towers and gatehouses to provide extra accommodation for men of rank within his household.

In 1317, Caerphilly passed into the hands of Hugh Despenser the younger, a highly favoured courtier of Edward II, who rebuilt the great hall on a lavish scale to entertain the king. By the early sixteenth century, however, Caerphilly Castle had fallen into serious decay; it was

Top

Becki and her sons explored Castell Coch with the help of the audio guide and guidebook, diving into the castle's rich history. © Hunter Torbet

Middle

The magnificent ceiling of the drawing room decorated with stars, birds and butterflies in rich, vibrant colours. © Hunter Torbet

Bottom

The immense size and dominating presence of Caerphilly Castle is clear from the approach through Dafydd Williams Gardens. © Becki Biggins

not until the twentieth century that many parts of the castle were restored by the fourth marquess of Bute.

At Caerphilly, the boys and I decided to follow the 'highlights' map — compared to Castell Coch, Caerphilly Castle is enormous, and it was a race against the clock to make it around the castle before fatigue or hunger (or both) overcame us. We loved trying to push the leaning tower upright (spoiler alert — we didn't manage it!) and listen to the engaging story of the two dragons, located within the semi-subterranean storehouse in the castle's middle ward.

We were lucky to visit when we did as the great hall has just re-opened following two years of extensive refurbishment (see pp. 26–32). One of the largest non-royal great halls ever built in Wales and England, it is stunning — as well as beautiful medieval-inspired decoration heralding the 1320s and the work of Hugh Despenser, it now contains exciting digital installations, new toilets, and a kitchen catering to private events.

Archie is a fan of dressing-up and joined other history buffs in trying on medieval costumes in the upper chamber of the inner east gatehouse. Given its size, it is easy to be overwhelmed at Caerphilly, but the map and some helpful signage kept us on track. We ticked all the must-see spots off our list before heading back through the gardens for a well-deserved ice-cream.

Day 3: Chepstow Castle

The next morning, we left our campsite and travelled the short journey to Chepstow Castle. No trip to the south Wales border would be complete (in my slightly biased opinion!) without a visit to this ancient stronghold which continues to make Chepstow such a popular town for visitors.

Firstly, the practicalities — next to the castle is the Castle Dell car park, which has space for larger vehicles and is adjacent to the public toilets, Tourist Information Centre and the town museum, plus it's a two-minute walk from the river.

We parked up and raced to the gatehouse, which doubles as the admission point. Again, we were presented with a highlights map, plus a leaflet for the boys to fill in — an activity trail all about the lives of the Marshal family, which held the boys' interest throughout our visit.

Begun in 1067, Chepstow Castle stands proudly above the river Wye and is one of the first Norman strongholds in Wales. Its history is so long and interesting that I could fill this entire magazine with it.

The boys love Chepstow Castle and, because we live nearby, we're regular visitors. Highlights include the restored Earl's Chamber, the remarkable remnants of painted decoration which can be seen at various points throughout the castle — including the entranceway to the great hall — and the Great Tower.

> For more than six centuries, the castle was home to some of the wealthiest and most powerful men of the medieval and Tudor ages. So, I urge you to visit the castle and read the guidebook to get the full and unedited story.

The wooden castle doors, now safely stored behind a barrier, were made no later than the 1190s, making them the oldest surviving castle doors in Europe.

The castle regularly hosts historical events, such as medieval re-enactments, art classes, Tudor music days and more, and is hired by an external company every summer to host a rock festival. Despite the castle being partially ruined, it still serves as an incredible community space more than 900 years after it was first built.

Before we knew it, it was time to jump in the van and head home. For me, this camping and castles trip was what memories are made of, and I know the boys loved it too. Thanks to the good work done by Cadw, and all its members, I'm content in the knowledge that my boys will be able to enjoy these monuments and sites with their families in the future and, who knows, they might do it from the comfort of their own campervan!

- For this project, Becki teamed up with Marquis Leisure, who gifted her the use of the Panama campervan.
- For more information on the Cadw sites featured in this article, visit **cadw.gov.wales**

Opposite, top

A statue of Lord Bute props up Caerphilly Castle's iconic leaning tower — a playful tribute to his role in conserving the monument in the twentieth century. © Becki Biggins

Opposite, middle 1

The children were captivated by Caerphilly's resident dragons in the castle's former storehouse — and the story of their legendary battle beneath Dinas Emrys, a hill in Gwynedd. © Becki Biggins

Opposite, middle 2

Chepstow Castle stretches dramatically across its clifftop perch, best appreciated from across the river Wye. © Becki Biggins

Opposite, bottom

Becki found Chepstow Castle easily accessible by campervan, making it a convenient stop on their castle adventure. © Andy Torbet

Top

The sprawling remains of Chepstow Castle, with its three baileys overlooked by the Great Tower, offer plenty of space for children to explore and play. © Becki Biggins

Left

There were lots of activities to entertain the children at Chepstow Castle, including this replica model puzzle of the Great Tower. © Becki Biggins