

DEAL CASTLE

Marine Road, Deal, Kent CT14 7BA

15th July 2019

Deal Castle was a mere few minutes' drive along the road from where we had just visited Walmer Castle and there was plenty of room in the car park alongside. The first disappointment appeared swiftly, though, in the form of a large white van parked right in the entrance, taking up most of the space. Clearly some sort of marquee scaffolding was being dismantled after a recent event, so the usual 'entrance photo' was impossible. However, we remained positive and went to the entrance desk, only to discover the second disappointment – no audio guide 😞



Inside the grounds of Deal Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

We grimaced politely and began our investigation, noting how Deal Castle's position and design provided all-round defence of both sea and town. It shared a lot of history with Walmer Castle, being one of King Henry VIII's artillery forts defending the south and east coasts of England. Built to protect the vulnerable beaches around Deal and the Downs (an important naval offshore anchorage), it was one of the three Downs castles, the other two being Walmer and Sandown.

It's well documented how Henry VIII's desire to divorce his first queen, Catherine of Aragon, had led to a sequence of events that outraged the pope and other European leaders of the Roman Catholic faith. Catherine was the aunt of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor – it was never going to go down well. By Henry taking over control of the Church in England, destroying monasteries and taking their lands and revenues, it was inevitable that conflict would follow. After years of hostility, England was in danger of invasion, leading to the Henrician defences.

Building progressed at Deal with approximately 1,400 men employed on the site. Working conditions couldn't have been great, as a strike for higher pay came to no avail. However, the castle was almost finished by the time a royal visitor stayed overnight, namely Anne of Cleves on her journey from Germany to become the fourth wife of Henry VIII. She landed at Deal in December 1539 and rested at the castle before continuing onward to meet her king (poor soul).

The Downs castles were completed in 1540 and by the end of Henry's reign in 1547, Deal was one of 42 new artillery forts. Its all-round defence resulted in a pleasing architectural design of a tall keep with six semi-circular bastions, encompassed by six further rounded bastions. The western bastion served as the gatehouse, surrounded by a moat and curtain wall. The castle walls were 15 feet/4.6 metres thick, made from locally made bricks, Kentish ragstone and Caen stone recycled/stolen from local monasteries. Deal was the largest of the three Downs castles.

In 1547, the castle had 57 guns, although Henry's vision for a fully armed castle with over 140 guns failed to materialise. The threat of invasion also failed to materialise, but the castle was reinforced in 1558 after further concerns of a French attack. Having been maintained on a very low budget, the castle had only 17 guns by 1570, but at around this time, the main bastions were filled with earth, most likely to allow heavier guns to be mounted on them. In 1573, Queen Elizabeth I made an inspection of the castle, which presumably passed muster.

The coastal defences as a whole were once again at the ready in 1588, this time in response to the threat from the famous Spanish armada. This state of readiness probably continued for the rest of Queen Elizabeth I's reign, particularly during the further Spanish threat of 1596-7.

Coastal defences were neglected while England was at peace with France and Spain, with the result that by 1615, Deal Castle was in a poor state of repair. The outer walls had been damaged by storms that filled the moat with water and pebbles from the beach, thus undermining the foundations. However, the small garrison of around 22 men did their best to protect the Downs, where ships from rival nations fell into disputes that often escalated into fighting. Also, pirate ships had a nasty habit of regularly preying on the lucrative merchant vessels...

In 1639, a naval battle between the Dutch and the Spanish took place in the Downs. The guns of Walmer, Deal and Sandown were unable to prevent a Dutch fleet attacking a Spanish fleet that was seeking the safety of the anchorage. Several Spanish vessels were sunk, with 2,000 shipwrecked soldiers coming ashore at Deal and Dover.

Deal Castle was seized by Parliamentarians at the beginning of the first English civil war of 1642-1646, although it played no further significant role at that time. However, when the second civil war broke out in 1648, Walmer and Deal castles declared for the king shortly after Sandown. A parliamentarian force was sent to deal with Deal – a statement that causes me inner amusement – and also the other Downs castles. Finding themselves under siege, Deal managed to hold out a while longer after Walmer's surrender in July, but massive mortar bombardment led to Deal's surrender in mid-August and Sandown's in September.



Deal Castle declared for the king (photo by Alan Santillo)

The castle was badly damaged during the conflict, but was kept equipped with gunpowder and reinforced with earthworks and soldiers. This was mainly because during the Commonwealth years (1649-1660) and following the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the English coast was often threatened during conflicts between the English navy and the Dutch navy. The Downs anchorage was a constant target and in 1667, the captain of Deal Castle, Colonel Silius Titus (a name begging to be mentioned), prepared for an attack landing – which in the end materialised near Chatham. At least he was well-prepared.

There was more trouble at home during the brief reign of the dual-titled King James II of England and Ireland & King James VII of Scotland, when the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 took place. James had inherited the thrones from his elder brother Charles II, but had converted to Roman Catholicism, which he was attempting to promote. When his son James was born in 1688 by his second wife, there were fears that a return to a Roman Catholic dynasty was certain.

A group of Protestant nobles appealed to William of Orange, the husband of James II's Protestant daughter Mary from his first marriage. In November 1688, William landed with an army in Brixham, Devon. Meanwhile in Deal, the townspeople seized the castle in support of William and took action to defend the Downs against a feared Catholic Irish invasion that never took place. In February 1689, William and Mary were crowned joint monarchs.

By 1713, peace was finally reigning, which led to a review of coastal fortifications. At Deal, this resulted in modernisation, with the installation of 12 modern 9-pounder guns. A captain's house was built, with a large garden just outside the castle, while the old Tudor parapets were demolished and replaced with crenellations that partly survive today. Further alterations resulted in a dual-purpose building, incorporating both a residence and a defensive battery of guns.

By the end of these improvements in the mid-18th century, only a lieutenant, master gunner and porter were normally based in the castle. In 1765, a small cabin in the courtyard provided shelter for the gunner on duty to rest or sleep, while the other gunners were sent for when required. The entire keep and inner bastions formed the captain's accommodation.

By 1773, there existed a garrison of only eight gunners, sufficient for only two guns. Extra help from militia and regular soldiers was called in during serious threats, as in 1744-5 and 1779 when French forces were once again expected. However, by the time of the French wars between 1792 and 1815, Deal Castle was no longer considered a significant defence.

Its symbolic importance nevertheless remained as the captain's residence, as he was considered a distinguished member of society who took a lead in local volunteer defence efforts. Deal and Walmer became home to a huge new barracks built in 1794-7, which catered for approximately 1,000 men. A naval hospital was added in 1800, to serve a Channel squadron of the Royal Navy, with the Navy yard at Deal acting as its supply depot.



Symbolic importance?

Several large expeditions subsequently took place from Deal, including an attack on the Netherlands in 1809, in an attempt to stop French use of the port of Antwerp. Deal was one of five embarkation ports for 40,000 men, but the expedition wasn't successful. Thousands of soldiers died from marsh fever, otherwise known as malaria, which filled the hospital at Deal to overflowing. Apart from the malaria, that sounds horribly familiar...

By the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, Deal Castle continued to be the captain's residence, while Deal itself remained a naval and military town. However, since the castle's role as a fortification had diminished, there were arguments in 1829 about whether it should be taxed as a private dwelling or continue to be exempt as a military site.

After the death of the last salaried captain in 1838, the castle more or less became just an occasional seaside retreat. A gunpowder magazine remained inside the castle, but by 1860, small gardens had been created in parts of the outer bastions, side by side with the four remaining 32-pounder guns. Although the Office of Ordnance continued to maintain the four guns and the magazine, they were more or less obsolete relics of the past.

In 1904, the War Office transferred the castle to the Office of Works, for conservation as a historic building. It was still the captain's residence, though, which resulted in disagreements about what should be paid for from public funds. Despite this, maintenance continued until the outbreak of World War I in 1914, resuming when the war had come to an end.



Obsolete relics of the past at Deal Castle

When a German invasion was feared in World War II, the Royal Artillery requisitioned the castle in May 1940, building two emplacements for 6-inch guns and an underground magazine. A concrete observation post was erected on the east bastion and the castle's interior was the HQ. Barbed wire and dragon's teeth (concrete obstacles) were put on the beach, promenade and nearby streets, to hinder enemy forces that might land. By April 1944, the threat of invasion had receded and the Home Guard replaced most of the artillery men. Good old Dad's Army!

A German bomber had caused a significant amount of damage to the captain's quarters and in 1951, Deal Castle was passed over to the Ministry of Works (originally known as the Office of Works), with restoration being carried out during the 1950s. The plans were made to restore it as closely as possible to its original Tudor form, before opening it to the general public.

After 1951, no captain was appointed, but the captaincy was revived in 1972 as an honorary appointment. Since 2008, the position has been held by the Commandant General of the Royal Marines, although the castle is no longer a residence. Frankly, I wasn't a bit surprised! As soon as we left the fresh sea air and entered inside, the dankness was palpable and the air of neglect was overwhelming. Not only that, we weren't sure what was where and which way to go.



Which way in the dankness?

While it was clear some effort had been made to supply audio explanations in strategic positions, the few we attempted to listen to seemed reluctant to work at all – so we gave up. To my mind there is nothing like the welcoming feel of a personal audio guide slung around your neck that explains the necessary and the nitty gritty, while often offering some juicy anecdotes to boot.

Talking of boots, the basement/cellars were obviously so wet at times that boots were provided – although since the weather had been dry for quite a while, we had no need. The basement was actually quite atmospheric and it occurred to me that the contrast between Deal's austere emptiness and Walmer's furnished comfort was actually an illuminating comparison.

The boots were actually there for those who wanted to explore what's known as the Rounds, a passage around the castle inside the wall at moat level. There are 53 embrasures (window-like openings) and one small door in the outer wall. Soldiers would have been able to fire handguns through the openings, or rush through the doorway in order to defend the moat. As a matter of interest, English Heritage sanitise the boots daily and if desired, there were muskets available, in case the need was felt to grab one and race around the Rounds pretending to be a soldier.

We felt no such need and I must confess that neither did I pay much attention to the new map table exhibit depicting 16th century Europe. I'm sure it was creditable, but I couldn't seem to get over the perceived overall lack of care that Deal Castle had received compared to Walmer Castle. Combined with my spatial inadequacies, I strongly suspect that I hadn't much appreciation of where I was in the castle at any given time. All I was able to feel was austere emptiness.



Austere emptiness (photo by Alan Santillo)

I do know that the core of the castle was the circular keep. I've since learned that from a central newel staircase of the keep, a door led to the previously mentioned basement and the ground floor. The latter was partitioned into rooms, originally to house the gunners of the garrison. It would have contained a communal hall and a kitchen with brick-lined ovens. This feels a bit closer to home, as my paternal great grandfather had been a gunner in the Royal Marine Artillery.

The first floor was used by the captain and mainly dates from the 1720s. There was apparently some early 18th century graffiti there, which to be honest, I can't remember if I saw or not. The keep's gun embrasures were converted into sash windows in the 18th and 19th centuries. I'm ancient enough myself to remember sash windows – they always felt a bit dangerous! Talking of windows, I did love the depth of some I espied on my spatially-challenged walk around:



Such depth!

Kay Santillo, 2019.

I mentioned graffiti and since our visit I've learned that at Deal Castle, "inaccessible to modern visitors" (according to English Heritage), is graffiti, carved since 1724 into the soft lead on the roof of the castle. There are apparently hundreds of differing images, giving a "tantalising glimpse of life at Deal over past centuries." I'll say it's tantalising!

As our wandering began to feel a little aimless, I realised that as a historic building, Deal Castle is very intact. Having been to the similarly empty-roomed St Mawes Castle in Cornwall, I could see the benefit of placing waxwork figures in situ to bring to life what would have happened in various places. Maybe one day, but for now, the old walls had to tell their story themselves.



What stories the old walls could tell...

It wasn't all disappointing, though, as there was a lovely little chapel that had obviously been modernised for use on special occasions – which must be quite an evocative and unusual experience. Again, it highlighted to me how other areas of the castle might look more interesting if paid a lot more attention. That would take money, of course – but I just couldn't stop thinking how Deal Castle deserves to be cared for. Imagine a little café area overlooking the sea...



The chapel (photo by Alan Santillo)

Our visit to Deal Castle was drawing to a close and as we left the building, we saw the large white van was still blocking the entrance. There was nothing to be done, so we departed with regret, looking back despondently to the gatehouse, which had once overlooked a walled garden. The dry, stone-lined moat would have been crossed via a stone causeway and drawbridge, while a portcullis would have protected the entrance.

The gatehouse still has its original iron-studded doors, considered among the best preserved for their age, as well as five murder holes. The latter would have helped defend the internal passageway, with handguns or missiles. As we walked to the nearby car park, I must confess that I almost found myself considering for a split second how I would quite like to murder that van driver!