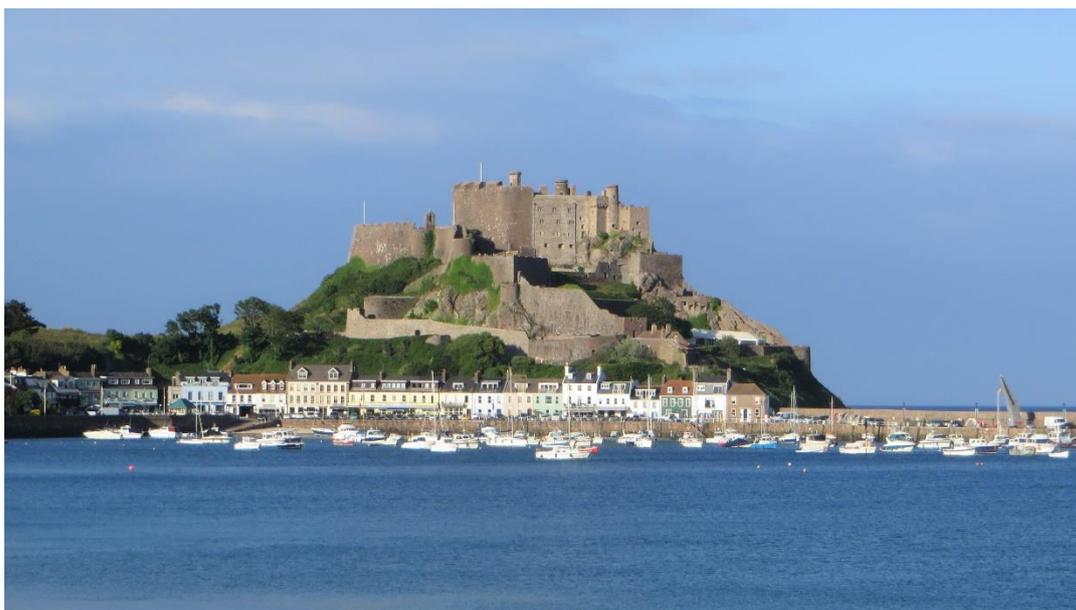


## **MONT ORGUEIL CASTLE**

Gorey, St Martin, Jersey JE3 6ET

### **16<sup>th</sup> September 2011**

My first visit to Mont Orgueil Castle had been in August 1983, but my memory on that score is somewhat rocky – which is quite relevant, as I took away an impression of a romantic looking, lofty fortress on a rocky promontory that was surrounded on three sides by cliffs and the sea. I had a feeling it might be a good idea to visit later when unencumbered by an inquisitive two-year old daughter. It turned out that the opportunity had at last presented itself and what felt even better, was that our now grown daughter was with us again!



**Mont Orgueil**

Archaeological evidence has indicated that the advantages of the rocky promontory in question had been recognised as early as the Neolithic period, about 6,000 years ago. By the Iron Age 2,500 years ago, there was definitely some form of defensive structure there. The remains of a ditch and earth ramparts have been identified and although degraded, would probably have provided a good start for the new fortress.

Mont Orgueil, if only I was sure how to pronounce it, means Mount Pride in French and Lé Vièr Châté in Jèrriais, meaning The Old Castle. It had been built on a promontory referred to as Gorroic in 1180 and a century later as Gorryk. The more familiar name of Gorey appeared in the 1330s, when French manuscripts referred to it as Gorri, Gurri and sometimes Le Château de Gouray. It seems to have acquired its Mont Orgueil handle in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, although local people often refer to it as Gorey Castle.

After a reasonably early start on the appointed day, we arrived at the popular fishing village of Gorey and managed to park close to the sea front. There was a short walk towards the very visible 'Château de Gouray' overlooking the harbour, before crossing the road and approaching the castle. I was expecting a lot of steep steps like the first occasion, but instead there was a user-friendly slope that was still decidedly steep towards the top, but easier on the calf muscles.

After paying our entrance fee to a most friendly man, we curiously ventured inside the castle and came across another most friendly man, but this one was dressed in some strange historic garb and giving an animated historic spiel to an audience of 20 or so about historic Jersey happenings. Mmm – history!

We'd missed the very beginning and came in somewhere around King Charles I (1600-49, reign from 1625), who was basically a bit mad and made lots of ridiculous laws that eventually led to civil war in England. To fill in some missing information: after the Norman Conquest of 1066, Kings of England were also Dukes of Normandy, but in 1204, King Philip II of France (1165-1223, reign from 1180), seized the Duchy of Normandy, with the nearest coastal town of Cartaret in Normandy only 13 miles away from Jersey.

With Jersey so vulnerable from attack, King John of England (1166-1216, reign from 1199) ordered that money must be raised to defend the Channel Islands. A 'bow and arrow' castle was built on Jersey, which unsurprisingly was basically a castle for use with bows and arrows. It served as a base for the garrison and also became the seat of Jersey government during the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Mont Orgueil Castle itself was first mentioned in a letter from King John dated 1212, built above the town of Gorey on its own granite outcrop, which meant it was almost impossible to undermine. The shape of its stone buildings was dictated by the narrowness of the ridge, with a hall connected to two square towers by long passageways. The area inside the ramparts was strengthened in 1224-5, when a thousand tree trunks from the New Forest were sent to make a palisade (a wooden wall used as a defensive structure or enclosure).



**Incorporated into the outcrop**

Once it had been built, the castle became a frontier outpost within sight of the enemy. The garrison was often recruited from the mainland and maintained by the king's representative, with money from the Crown. There were frequent raids from France and throughout the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the castle was consequently improved and extended as necessary.

The great hall and crypt formed the keep on the cliff edge at the site's highest point, to which a middle ward was added, enclosed by curtain walls with five towers placed on the angles. The lower and outer wards had similar walls and towers, thus making it a concentric castle. Many machicolations – a wonderful word meaning a floor opening between supporting corbels of a battlement through which missiles could be dropped – were no doubt used to advantage with pebbles and rocks from the beach, plus boiling water and burning pitch.

As with many castles, work on keeping fortifications up to date was neglected during times of peace, which in 1294 resulted in a massive raid by the French, when over 1,500 islanders were killed and the countryside was burned and looted. The French nevertheless failed to take the castle, which was afterwards strengthened using funds from King Edward I (1239-1307, reign from 1272).



**A fortress to be reckoned with**

In 1327, Sir John des Roches was appointed keeper of the castle, after having been sent from England to inspect and strengthen defences. In his report to the king, Sir John said the castle had been under-equipped, was partly in ruins and the garrison remained unpaid. He declared that the best way to defend Jersey was for the ordinary defence of the island to be left to the islanders, with the castle manned and maintained by an English garrison.

During the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there were regular unsuccessful attacks by the French, until Bertrand du Guesclin invaded in 1373. Some of the attackers managed to undermine the outer wall and chased the garrison into the keep. Du Guesclin, however, was afraid of reinforcements and made an agreement with the warden of Jersey, Sir William Asthorpe, that if the English fleet failed to arrive within two months, the castle would be surrendered to the French. The relief force arrived, so presumably a rather wishy-washy invasion drew to a close.

The Wars of the Roses had begun in 1455 and even though the conflict was taking place in England, Jersey was divided by Yorkist and Lancastrian family feuds. In 1461, it's believed the castle was very probably betrayed to French supporters of the Lancastrian side, who proceeded to capture the castle and rule Jersey for seven years. However, they were eventually driven out by the Yorkist Admiral of the Fleet in 1468.

Although Mont Orgueil had been the primary defence of Jersey since it had been built, the increased use of gunpowder in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was rendering it at risk from the hilly terrain around it, particularly Mont St Nicholas, which was the adjacent hill overlooking the castle and therefore at a similar level.

Attempts were made throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century to remodel the castle as an artillery fortress, because it was vital that the Channel Islands were defended. A grand battery was constructed as a protective shield for the keep from the hill opposite, as well as other improvements, but the builders were continually outpaced by developments in artillery.

The decision was therefore made to build a new artillery fortress, namely Elizabeth Castle in St Aubin's Bay. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Mont Orgueil was relegated to 'Le Vieux Château' – 'the old castle', which seems rather a shame. Realistically, of course, it's vital to adapt to changing times. In 1600, Sir Walter Raleigh as governor of Jersey, rejected a plan to demolish Mont Orgueil in order to recycle stone for Elizabeth Castle, because he thought it would be a pity to lose the old castle. Hooray for Sir Walter Raleigh!



**Impressive but outdated** (photo by Alan Santillo)

During the English Civil War (1642-1651), the old castle saw some action in November 1643, as it was from there that the Royalists under Sir George Carteret retook Jersey from the Parliamentarians. However, the Parliamentarians invaded Jersey in December 1651 and due to Mont Orgueil's defencelessness in the face of modern artillery, it was surrendered.

The castle was also useful as the island's prison, since the English Government found it handy as a place for detaining awkward customers, such as Thomas Waite and Henry Smith, who had signed the death warrant of King Charles I (1600-49, reign from 1625). Having been saved from demolition, though, it was again left to deteriorate and by 1693 was in a ruinous state. It even lost its role as a prison when a new one was built in St Helier at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The barracks, which had still been in use, became so dilapidated that it was impossible to house troops there. Repairs were carried out from 1730-1734 and parts of the castle were adapted for garrison accommodation for the rest of the century. In 1800, the corbelled tower was adapted so that Admiral Philippe d'Auvergne could use it as his headquarters for the secret service organisation he was running in Brittany and mainland Normandy.

In 1846, the castle was visited by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, but in June 1907 it was handed over to the people of Jersey in a generally ruinous condition by the British Government. Charming! From 1929 it was managed as a museum site, although during the Occupation, the Germans garrisoned the castle and added some modern fortifications that fortunately blended in with the existing structures. Islanders standing in the castle could hear the boom of artillery and see smoke above St Malo after the D-Day landings of 1944.

Since 1994, the castle has been managed by the Jersey Heritage Trust and after a long programme of restoration, thanks to a £3-million grant, was reopened to the public in April 2006. On our first visit in 1983, it must have been at an in-between stage. Although my memory of that visit is vague, I know some of the castle was open and I enjoyed seeing several historical exhibitions and displays.



**Spectacular views from the lofty heights**

Back to the present and the friendly man in the strange historic garb was finishing his tale. He was from Jersey and although his family had chosen to live in England while Jersey was occupied, he implied strongly that Jersey people had felt abandoned by Britain during World War II.

We were eager to start our exploration of the castle once he'd finished talking, but first we had to ascend a lot of steps. This meant that every now and again we could see wonderful views of the harbour way down below (see above).

As ever, I appreciated the greenery and planting to be found in various places, especially an enclosed 17<sup>th</sup>-century herb garden that was small but well-placed within its castle context. It was one of the first sights we came across, looking very neat, green and peaceful in its sheltered position from a wind that seemed to have suddenly sprung up from nowhere. I could have stayed a lot longer looking out to sea, but there were sights to be seen!



**17<sup>th</sup>-century tranquillity** (photo by Alan Santillo)

Until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the castle had been open to the public only on Easter Monday, when crowds used to arrive from all over the island. Current visitor numbers were healthy, but not a problem, as we lost each other from time to time within a network of staircases, narrow passages, towers and sudden, unexpected rooms with intriguing contents.

I generally became quite lost going up and down further steps and in and out of so many different areas and rooms – there was such a lot to see that I know I didn't see it all. In fact, I felt as if I may have missed even more than I saw, but I was very pleased to find the undercroft and found it particularly memorable.

There are suggestions that this undercroft could have been built after 1208, initially with a timber and thatch roof, its wooden beams stretching from wall to wall. The current vaulted roof, complete with its three pillars, was added by the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Influences for the particular vaulting found in the Channel Islands has been postulated as coming from French crusaders influenced by the eastern Mediterranean, or from Gascony in south-west France.



**The undercroft**

As a whole, the story of Mont Orgueil Castle was illustrated in a highly original fashion by specially commissioned artwork, which was fascinating in its sheer diversity. From colourful paintings of Sir Walter Raleigh, prayer nuts, the Tree of Succession, a 3D holographic portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, a witchcraft exhibit, the Wound Man and the Wheel of Fortune (though not in the game show sense) to the Wheel of Urine complete with colour gradations, it was great! A sculpture depicting the plight of prisoners who had been held at the castle over the centuries was particularly emotive:



**'Prison Tower' by Bill Ming & Stan Bullard** (photo by Alan Santillo)

I particularly liked the Tree of Succession not just because it was striking, but because it represented the complexity of the dynastic relationships between the English and French royal families. It was especially fitting since we were there with our English daughter and her French fiancé.

Another memorable sight in the castle grounds was a large metal sculpture named *The Perfect Knight* by Owen Cunningham. This imposing figure depicted Sir Hugh Calverly, since for reasons unknown (to me anyway, unused to perfect knights or even knights) he was considered an ideal knight. He was certainly impressive in a metalwork kind of way.



**What a knight...** (photo by Alan Santillo)

The whole castle felt like an enchanted place, a world away from the current madness of life as we know it today. Restoration work had opened up previously inaccessible areas to the public, which was obviously a great improvement.

It very much gave me the impression of an ancient building that was housing modern delights and keeping interest in history alive. It may have been given the label 'the old castle', or 'l'é Vièr Châ té' in Jèrriais, but to my mind it definitely has a legitimate and well-earned place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It was just as interesting wandering around outside as it was inside. Several wooden sculptures of soldiers in various poses gave an added sense of historic vibrancy to the place, although some were definitely more lifelike than others! There were also some wonderful, far-reaching views, which we were fortunate to look at on a clear day. From one vantage point, our future French son-in-law was able to see his homeland in the distance (without binoculars).



**Wonderful, far-reaching views**

There's no doubt that Mont Orgueil Castle has an air of abiding dramatic appeal, as it continues its 800+ year watch over its very own fishing port of Gorey. Thanks to Sir Walter Raleigh, it remains one of the finest known examples of a medieval fortress and holds an especially significant place in the once turbulent history of Jersey. I'd love to visit again.



Photo by Alan Santillo