

PENDENNIS CASTLE

Castle Drive, Falmouth, Cornwall TR11 4LP

5th September 2012

We visited Pendennis Castle after having visited St Mawes Castle in the morning and I feel this was a disservice to Pendennis, because it was a hot day and I for one was feeling slightly jaded. I am therefore determined to re-visit Pendennis Castle in its own right at a future date, but for now will delve into the history, so I can walk around with some proper background knowledge for once.



Side view of Pendennis Castle

Like its sister castle at St Mawes, Pendennis Castle was built between 1539 and 1545, in the latter years of King Henry VIII's reign from 1509-47, when England was at serious risk of invasion from Catholic Europe.

Henry had incurred their collective Catholic wrath by attempting to annul his long-standing marriage to Catherine of Aragon, in order to marry his new love, Anne Boleyn. It was understandable, seeing that Catherine of Aragon's nephew was Charles V of Spain, the Holy Roman Emperor, that this move was taken as a personal insult and therefore demanded retribution.

France and the Holy Roman Empire declared an alliance against Henry in 1538, with Pope Paul III encouraging the two countries to attack England. Henry's response was to issue an order (a 'device' programme) in 1539 for a series of artillery forts to be constructed along the English coastline – thus explaining the occasionally used term of Device Forts. These were equipped with guns to deal with enemy warships and troop transports.

Traditionally, the Crown had been in the habit of leaving coastal defences to local communities and their lords, with basic defences in the south-west and Sussex coastlines consisting mainly of towers and blockhouses. As there was often much more unrest in northern England, the situation there was somewhat different, with fortifications considered generally more impressive. Perhaps...

On the south coast of Cornwall, the Carrick Roads refers to a deep estuary at the mouth of the River Fal. It was an important anchorage that served shipping from the Atlantic and the Mediterranean and a perfect place for an enemy to establish a base. In 1539, a small gun tower known as the Little Dennis blockhouse was built, overlooking the anchorage entrance, with plans to construct five artillery forts. As it turned out, only two were built on opposite shores of the Carrick Roads, at Pendennis and St Mawes, thus allowing overlapping gunfire across the water.

As in other 'Henrician castles', Pendennis had a circular design that allowed all-round fire from the guns mounted at several levels. It was built at a cost of £5,614 on the land of John Killigrew, who was a member of the local Cornish gentry. It's considered most likely that he oversaw the construction of the fort and was appointed its first captain. However, while St Mawes had a significant amount of effort put into its construction, with good-quality stone and decorative carvings, Pendennis was a simple round gate and tower enclosed by a lower curtain wall.

The initial threat of invasion passed when peace was made with France in 1558, although the Spanish threat to south-west England became more intense and war broke out in 1569. Resulting from this, a defensive earthwork was built to the north-west of the castle in order to protect it from a land attack, while another gun battery was added alongside the blockhouse, facing the river.



Guns, guns, guns

As for the garrison at Pendennis in this period, the number of men varied according to the level of imminent threat. It was fully garrisoned by up to 100 men during the planned Spanish invasions of 1574, 1579, 1588 and 1596-7, although more men could be mustered from the local community if necessary. In 1599, for instance, Pendennis was reportedly guarded by 200 soldiers.

In 1593, raiding parties destroyed the Killigrew family home at Arwenack and in 1595, four Spanish ships attacked coastal towns in what is referred to as the raid on Mounts Bay. In 1597, a Spanish fleet with 20,000 men intended to land troops at Pendennis and capture the Carrick Roads. Bad weather fortuitously saved the day, but the attempt forced Queen Elizabeth I to review the situation at Pendennis.

It was recommended that the castle's defences be extended significantly. As a result, a military engineer named Paul Ive set about surrounding the original Henrician castle with a ring of earthworks, bastions, embrasures and a ditch supported by stone revetments – revetments being sloping structures formed to secure an area from artillery damage, etc. This is another new word I have learned, which is one reason why I like to write about castle visits! In this case, the work was carried out between 1597 and 1600 by a team of 400 local workers.

By 1600, the newly extended fortress had the capability of defending the whole of Pendennis headland. It was in the shape of an elongated pentagon, defined by a high rampart and the previously mentioned ditch, with a bastion projecting at each angle. Since I'm currently into definitions, a bastion is a projection built at an angle to the line of a wall, in order to allow defensive fire in several directions.

A large area of the new fortress, triangular in shape, overlooked Pendennis Point. A smaller fort there included the original gun tower known as Little Dennis. The bastions were equipped with heavy guns to defend the fort from attack by land and sea. As it happened, however, England was at peace in the early 1600s and Pendennis was neglected. Unfortunately, the light was tricky for a photo:



Little Dennis

The Killigrew family had controlled the castle for several decades, with John Killigrew's son and then grandson taking on the role of captain until 1605. The garrison's pay was reported to be two years in arrears, with the men being forced to eat limpets collected from the shoreline, which doesn't particularly put the Killigrews in a good light. Despite this reprehensible state of affairs, an Italian-style gatehouse was added to the castle in around 1611.

The Thirty Years' War took place, primarily in central Europe, during the years 1618-48. War with Spain broke out again in 1624 and between 1625 and 1630, England attempted to influence the outcome of the war, mainly by its opposition to Spain. Pendennis once again required improvements and in 1627, a new rampart and ditch (known as the Hornwork) was built across the peninsula, replacing the Tudor version and strengthening land defences to the north.

The crisis passed, but the captains of Pendennis and St Mawes frequently disagreed about rights to search and detain incoming shipping, with both sides arguing that the traditional right to do so was theirs. The situation came to a head in 1630, when a legal dispute broke out that was eventually resolved when the Admiralty issued a compromise that both castles share the job.

In 1642, when civil war broke out in England between King Charles I and Parliament, Pendennis and the south-west of England took a Royalist stance. The expanding town of Falmouth was an important port for King Charles I's army. When the war turned in favour of the Parliamentarians, plans were made to shelter Prince Charles (the son of King Charles I) at the castle during the winter of 1645-46, although he only stayed briefly in early 1646.

Not long after Prince Charles had left Pendennis for the Isles of Scilly at the beginning of March, Thomas Fairfax (3rd Lord Fairfax of Cameron and Parliamentary commander-in-chief during the Civil War), arrived in Cornwall with a substantial army. By then, nearly all other Royalist positions had fallen and St Mawes Castle surrendered as soon as Fairfax approached. The comparison between Pendennis and St Mawes is interesting, but I mean nothing judgmental about that – it's only history, after all.

Meanwhile in Pendennis Castle, 1,000 soldiers were under the command of Sir John Arundell (born in about 1566 at Trerice, near Newquay), who declared that he would die rather than surrender. Since he was around 80 years old at the time, he didn't have all that much to lose – unlike his soldiers, who presumably had no choice (and neither did their dependents). He was assisted by Henry Killigrew, a Member of Parliament, which seems a little odd?

Parliamentary forces set up headquarters at Arwenack House in Falmouth, the burnt-out home of the Killigrew family destroyed in 1593 by Spanish raiders. They bombarded the castle from the land, while fresh supplies were prevented from arriving by a flotilla of ten ships out at sea. The garrison's defences had been supported with artillery fire from a Royalist warship, but this was deliberately run aground to the north of the castle and served as an additional gun platform.

The garrison was eventually reduced to eating horse and dog meat. By July, food was so short that some of the garrison tried unsuccessfully to break out by sea to obtain supplies and on 15th August, Sir John Arundell agreed to an honourable surrender. Pendennis had been the penultimate Royalist stronghold to hold out – the final one being Raglan Castle in Wales. Around 900 survivors left Pendennis Castle two days later, although some were terminally ill from malnutrition.

Parliament kept a garrison at Pendennis, but in 1647 it cut back on the armed forces across the country, offering soldiers who lost their posts two months' pay. Quite unfairly, those at Pendennis were offered only one month's pay, to which insult the garrison mutinied under the leadership of Colonel Richard Fortescue.

They seized the unfortunate visiting Parliamentary commissioners and refused to leave Pendennis until their additional pay was granted. On reflection, you can't exactly blame them. Parliament negotiated and the garrison soldiers were granted their full dues. Colonel Fortescue (no doubt branded a troublemaker) was found employment elsewhere and another smaller garrison was installed.

A short while before King Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660, the Royalist Sir Peter Killigrew became the new captain of Pendennis Castle. Continuing warfare with the Dutch and the French resulted in an additional gun battery being constructed at Crab Quay, at the south-east of the main fortification. In about 1700, a new guard barracks and gateway were built.



Garrison life from earlier days

Coastal defences were reviewed in 1714, when Colonel Christian Lilly stated that Pendennis was neglected and "in a very ruinous condition." The parapets had collapsed, the ramparts could be scaled quite easily and the ditches were full of brambles. His recommended repairs were slow to materialise and it wasn't until 1732-39 that the interior was re-designed, the old ramparts were re-formed, new 18-pounder cannons were installed and new buildings were constructed, including gunners' barracks, a storehouse and a gunpowder magazine.

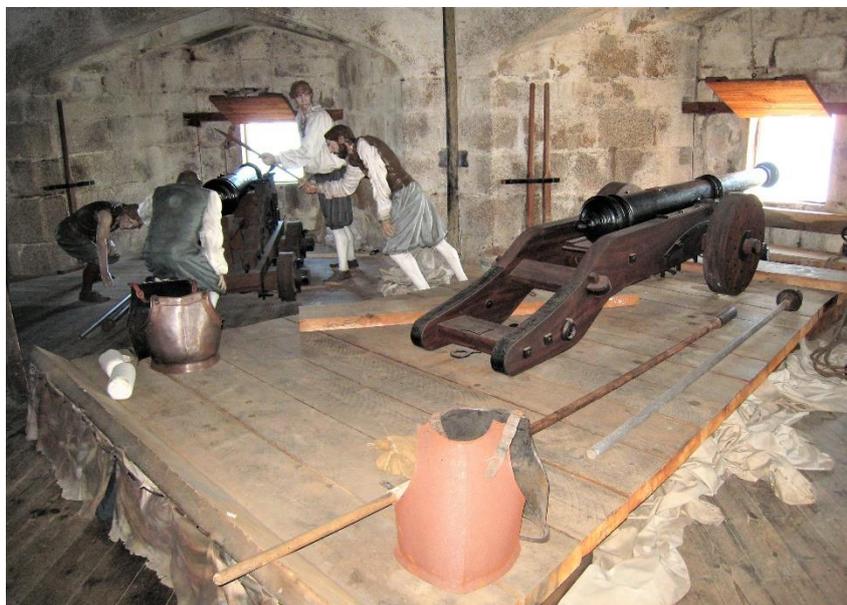
From 1775-80, during the American War of Independence, France declared itself allied with the revolutionaries, thus causing war with Britain to break out in 1778. As a precautionary measure, a decision was made to garrison Pendennis Castle with a locally formed Miners' Militia and new barracks were built.

During the Napoleonic Wars of 1793 to 1815, Falmouth became an important military depot and the temporary Pendennis garrison was made permanent. The Crown bought the land from the Killigrew family and made several improvements.

The defences were quite substantially strengthened with five raised gun batteries (known as cavaliers) on the landward rampart, while a new sea battery, called Half Moon Battery, was erected outside the fort to the south. A number of store buildings, barracks and a hospital were constructed inside the fort and outside to the north on Hornwork Common.

During this very unsettled time, the castle was equipped with up to 48 guns, while a new artillery unit of volunteers was formed in Falmouth in order to support fortifications around the harbour. Many of those volunteers were in fact trained at Pendennis before being deployed elsewhere in Cornwall.

However, by the end of the Napoleonic wars, Pendennis had basically become neglected, with many of the guns becoming unusable and many of the temporary buildings being removed. The old post of captain was eventually abolished in 1837, changing to the command of a conventional military appointment.



An inside display of gunners in action

The rise and fall of Pendennis continued in the 1850s, when England and France were rivals in the battle to gain military and naval advantage, since Falmouth continued to be an important harbour. Nineteen 32- and 56-pounder (14.5 and 24.5 kg) guns were installed from the year 1854, particularly at Half Moon Battery and at Crab Quay, at the east side of the headland.

During a nationwide programme of fort building in the 1860s, Pendennis was considered less of a risk than other coastal locations, although its outdated defences were gradually improved from 1880-1900. Military technology had advanced dramatically and an up-to-date electronically operated minefield was laid across the entrance to the Carrick Roads in 1885, with mines that could be remotely detonated and were jointly controlled from Pendennis and St Mawes. They had presumably moved on from their historic rivalry.

As a result of Falmouth's designation as a Defended Port in 1887, many new and different defences for the estuary were commanded from Pendennis Castle. Breech-loading guns replaced the now outdated, muzzle-loading guns; searchlights aided fighting at night; and electricity and telephones allowed for more efficient communication. Six-inch guns (firing shells with a six-inch diameter) were installed to engage warships, while quick-firing 6- and 12-pounder guns (2.7 and 5.44 kg) were intended to deal with fast torpedo boats.

Such complex defences needed permanent staff and in 1902 the 105th Regiment Royal Garrison Artillery took over the manning of Pendennis Castle. Yet more new barracks were built for them and a War Signal Station was constructed on the roof of the original Henrician fort, to co-ordinate shipping movements. Sadly, the 16th-century guardhouse alongside the keep was demolished. It's true that the old needs to make way for the new, but sometimes it feels like a loss.

Twelve years later and World War I (1914-18) catapulted millions of people into unprecedented times. At Pendennis, the castle was the command centre of coast artillery defences for the west of Cornwall. It was reinforced by soldiers from the Territorial Force and additional defences were constructed on the landward side, with protection from key defence points and trenches. Thousands of troops came for training before heading to France and Belgium, while the Royal Navy used the anchorage for anti-submarine vessels, minesweepers and convoys.

After the war, Pendennis was still used to train gunners, but in 1920, its 16th-century buildings were handed over to the guardianship of the Ministry of Works. At the start of World War II in 1939, however, it resumed control of coastal defences. Twin 6- and 12-pounder guns countered the threat from torpedo boats, while guns in new covered positions at Half Moon Battery gave long-range defence against ships. From 1943, these were the latest radar-controlled 6-inch (152 mm) Mark 24 models that could operate with precision.



Half Moon Battery (photo by Alan Santillo)

Several temporary buildings and huts were added across the site and zig-zag trenches were dug for protection. The 16th-century fort became the headquarters of Falmouth Fire Command, from which the Fire Commander was able to manage all the guns across the area. A Battery Plotting Room was also set up in order to co-ordinate target data coming in from all sources.

Falmouth was able to play a significant role supporting the D-Day invasion of France in June 1944 and during the preparations, Pendennis played its part when its gun batteries were used to defend against German E-boats. After the war had ended in 1945, Pendennis Castle continued to be used for training until 1956, when the Coast Artillery branch of the Army was disbanded.

In 1957, the castle was returned to the Ministry of Works, who prepared it for public opening. Attention was focused on the 16th-century castle and many of the more modern military buildings were cleared away. Between 1963-2000, the barracks became a Youth Hostel and in 1984, English Heritage took over the castle, placing greater priority on conservation of its more modern features.

In the 1990s, extensive work was carried out to refurbish the fortifications, along with archaeological surveys and excavations – which is always a good move to my mind. Along with investigating the old, new facilities were opened for visitors. At the beginning of the 21st century, the old sergeant's mess and the custodian's house were successfully converted into holiday cottages.

Pendennis Castle continues to be a popular tourist attraction, while the heritage agency Historic England describes it as "...one of the finest examples of a post-medieval defensive promontory fort in the country." This seems a fair assessment, as it stands proudly dominating its rocky headland, having adapted for over four centuries to intermittent changing methods of warfare amid frequent threats of invasion. I can't wait to visit again with fresh eyes, decidedly more historical understanding and of course, my camera 😊



Somebody left some boots behind...

14th September 2020

The second visit took place eight years and nine days later, in a lull between the first and second Covid lockdowns. Pre-booking for specific time slots in order to monitor visitor numbers was required, although once inside, we could take as much time as we liked. Face masks were still requested, but we were very happy to comply and took advantage of a beautiful, warm September day.

It felt a little odd to arrive and queue to have our names checked off on a list – but rather that in the circumstances than catching the dreaded virus, with case numbers still a cause for concern. The staff on duty were very polite and helpful and told us the details of two guided tours we could take, one to the main castle building and another to the Half Moon Battery, which seemed a good idea.

We approached the gatehouse with barely suppressed excitement and saw more Covid advice: "Please keep left and single file". We therefore dutifully walked on the left in single file across a bridge spanning a dry ditch, with steep grassy ramparts either side. The original entrance had been a single arched passage across a wooden bridge, with the final part being a drawbridge that was operated by a counterbalance mechanism from the passage.



The 'modern' gatehouse (photo by Alan Santillo) **and the old gatehouse**

At the inner end of the gatehouse passage were two arched alcoves, one of which contained the winding mechanism for a later drawbridge that became redundant when the current solid bridge was built. It was incredible to think how thousands of people had walked through that archway, once the castle's main entrance.

The passage emerged between the guard barracks each side that had been built in around 1700 of dressed granite and are thought to be the earliest surviving barracks in Britain. As well as accommodating the guard, they were also utilised later as a hospital, a schoolroom and a carpenter's workshop.



Guard barracks left & storehouse centre (photo by Alan Santillo)

A little further on was a sturdy storehouse, built between 1793 and 1811, one of three storehouses containing supplies for British troops fighting Napoleon's army in Portugal and Spain. However, the time for the tour of Half Moon Battery was approaching, so we hurried across the parade ground to join twenty or so people.

As we waited on grass that had been dried out by the summer sun, it was interesting to see how most people were adhering to the Covid advice we'd all been given for the past six months, to keep a 'safe' distance from others. The guide appeared on time and after a brief introduction, he took us on the pathway to two tunnels that eventually led us out into the battery.



First tunnel leading to Half Moon Battery (photo by Alan Santillo)

I must say that although the whole subject matter of warfare and guns is not my particular interest, it *was* nevertheless interesting and brought to life in an easy-to-understand way. The half moon refers, of course, to the battery's shape in the curved form of a half moon, so its guns could be fired in a wide arc out to sea.



A 6-inch/152-mm Mark 24 gun (photo by Alan Santillo)

During World War II, the guns were replaced when the older guns were worn out and modern guns with greater range and power took their place. The camouflaged concrete gun houses were added in 1941 and gave protection from aircraft, while around the gun pits were lockers for ammunition supplies brought up from the underground magazines. The guns currently on display are similar to the ones installed in 1943, with an impressive range of 12 miles and the very useful ability to receive target data from radar. At this time, the battery had a total staff of 99, which included 36 on guns and the remainder on searchlights and position-finding cells, or otherwise involved in communications.

As ever, I liked the evidence of human occupation, in both senses of the word. Painted numbers and letters above hooks were a ghostly reminder of when the battery had been manned by gun personnel defending our beautiful shores:

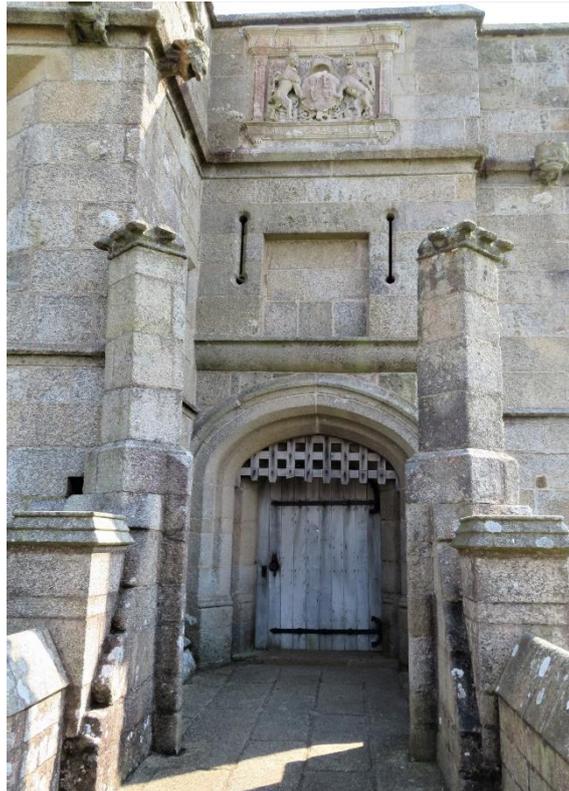


Reminders of past action (photo by Alan Santillo)

It was lunchtime, so we found a place to sit and watched the Pendennis Castle world go by as we ate our sandwiches. It was hot enough to have to seek shelter from the full-on sun, as we looked forward to taking the tour around the main circular building. Since our visit in 2012, my memory had sadly become vague.

Although designed as a gun fort, the castle was used from the middle of the 17th century for accommodation, an officer's mess, offices and storage. The approach was through an arch in the rear wall of the original Tudor gatehouse, most of which was demolished in 1902 and replaced by another building that was taken down in 1921. Beyond it, a stone bridge built in 1902 to replace the first wooden one, spanned the ditch to the entrance of the forebuilding. This forebuilding was added in in the second half of the 16th century to replace an earlier one.

As the tour time approached, we stood with a dozen or so others, looking up with interest at the elaborate carving of the Tudor royal arms. Columns at the end of the bridge supported a wooden beam that once guided the chains of a drawbridge through slots above the entrance to a portcullis in the room behind. The portcullis and drawbridge were counterbalanced for easy operation from inside. As I tried to imagine this, the guide arrived and welcomed us with an introductory spiel.



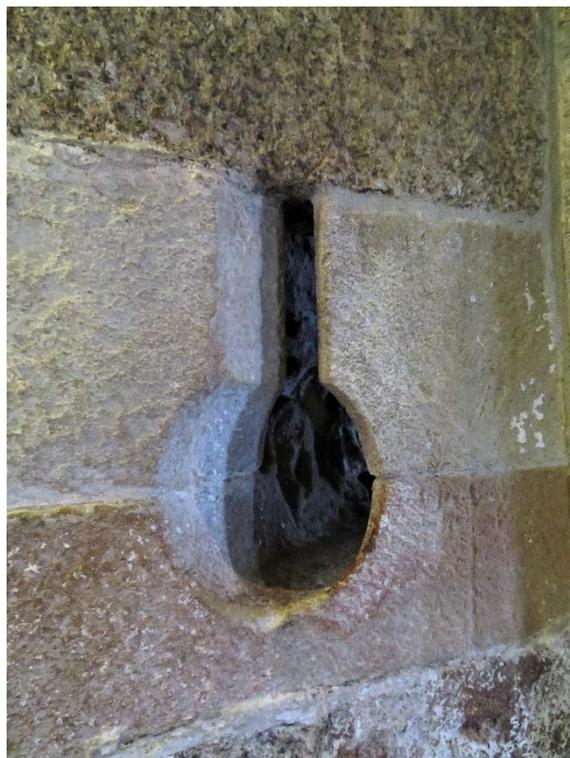
The forebuilding (photo by Alan Santillo)

The forebuilding housed the apartments of the commanding officer, containing two floors each with three rooms and a defensible roof. Once inside the lobby, a door led straight out to the chemise, which of course is the French word for shirt. I have learned that a chemise in medieval castles was typically a low wall encircling the keep, which protected the base of the tower. Another term commonly used in English is an apron wall. Shirt or apron, it's basically immaterial to me.

As well as the chemise door, another door led to a pair of rooms. The left-hand room contained an unusual oval window and may have been another guard room, but in the 18th century, it was the commanding officer's living room. The right-hand room was a kitchen, with a large fireplace and baking oven, but it was also the way into the gun tower and to the first floor and roof via a spiral stair. As we looked around trying to see what was photo-worthy at the same time as the guide was plying us with information, I realised my dual-tasking skills had diminished.

From the forebuilding, the entrance to the tower was guarded by doors at both ends of the wall's thickness. To defend the inner doors, an intriguing circular hole had been cut into the wall at an angle, through which a handgun could be fired. I loved to come across evidence of such simple but innovative adaptations, although at the time they could have meant the difference between life or death and I fell to wondering if they'd ever been used. Hole in the wall defence indeed.

The large octagonal first-floor room had originally been designed as a gun floor, but during construction, the castle's design was adapted and the outside chemise (shirt/apron) was built to serve as the gun floor instead. The large room thus became the garrison's living area, although the seven gun alcoves bear witness to the room's original purpose. A small latrine had been built into one alcove and by 1715, the room was partitioned with six rooms and a middle passage.



Hole in the wall defence

As we looked around the pleasingly-shaped octagonal room, I remembered that in 2012, it had been 'dressed' with various models depicting the life of the garrison in their living quarters. I supposed these had been stored away as another Covid effect – a previous one being a residue of hand gel on certain surfaces.



The first-floor octagonal room (photo by Alan Santillo)

The upper gun room was similar to the floor below, but we were told it had been prone to leaks and it was indeed decorated with strategically placed buckets and some heavy-duty ceiling props. However, we were able to go out onto the open roof gun platform, which gave us a brilliant view all around, of the castle grounds below and out across the Carrick Roads where St Mawes Castle was visible:



St Mawes Castle across the Carrick Roads (photo by Alan Santillo)

The open roof of the tower had seven embrasures for guns – an embrasure being an opening in the parapet, the low protective wall around the roof. The lookout turret above had seven small windows, used for monitoring ships at sea. It was covered by a lead cupola and once had what must have been a necessary fireplace.

We were allowed to take a little time to look around, but I felt it was a more limited experience than we would have had in non-Covid times. This was a pity, but I for one was more than glad to be at the castle and enjoy what we were able to enjoy. We walked across the parade ground to the use the facilities in the Royal Garrison Artillery barracks, where the tearoom tables were 'socially distanced'.

This impressive building was a barracks and headquarters for the 105th regiment of the Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA), built between 1900-1902. Separate rooms held 11-12 private soldiers, while corporals and sergeants had single rooms.



Royal Garrison Artillery barracks (photo by Alan Santillo)

The central tower held a 20,000-gallon/90,000-litre water tank and also had a clock facing the parade ground, which was vital for keeping to a strict military regime. In 1911, the soldiers had been replaced by volunteers of the Territorial Force (now known as the Territorial Army). A cookhouse, latrines and baths were once located behind the barracks, although these have been demolished.

It had been especially interesting piecing together the timeline of the original Henrician castle and its later additions, particularly the later World Wars. Although we made two rather piecemeal visits, I would recommend a day's visit to wander around the different sections, including Little Dennis down on the shoreline.

Nowadays Pendennis Castle plays a prominent part in local activities, including special events put on by English Heritage. It was once a castle to be reckoned with and remains so nowadays, albeit it in decidedly different ways!



Entrance to the Tudor fort (photo by Alan Santillo)



Little Dennis (top left) & part of Half Moon Battery
(photo by Alan Santillo)