

ST MAWES CASTLE

St Mawes, Truro, Cornwall TR2 5DE

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My memory is dim as to whether a previous visit to St Mawes Castle had ever happened, but I really think I would have remembered such a beauty! When I discovered my family history involved the rather notorious Vivian clan from Cornwall, three distant members of which had been captains of the castle during the 16th and 17th centuries, I could hardly restrain myself.

It was a pleasantly inspiring day for a castle visit and photo-taking, as we approached one of King Henry VIII's best-preserved coastal artillery fortresses. It had been built between 1539 and 1545 in the latter years of his reign and was situated on a headland over the Carrick Roads waterway at the mouth of the River Fal - the Carrick Roads being an important anchorage for all kinds of shipping from the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.



Most attractive St Mawes Castle (photo by Alan Santillo)

The original plan had been to protect this waterway with five castles, but St Mawes Castle, along with Pendennis Castle at the other side of the estuary, were the only two built, as the guns from both castles were able to provide overlapping fire across the water.

St Mawes Castle is overlooked by higher land to the rear, although the entrance to the castle is at the top of the site, along with the high-level gun batteries and the 16th century castle. The site then slopes down to the waters of the Fal estuary, where gun batteries and a 16th century blockhouse are strategically placed in what is nowadays a very picturesque setting.

Traditionally, the Crown had taken a minimal role in building and maintaining fortifications, leaving this task to local communities and their lords. Although maritime raids took place, the coastal blockhouses and towers of the south-west were considered to be adequate, as a serious invasion was thought unlikely. However, in view of the international tension generated by Henry VIII's break from the Roman Catholic Church, defences were stepped up...

With this background history in mind, we entered the castle through the original guardhouse to pay our dues and were given an audio guide each - my joy was complete! This led us directly onto a bridge across the ditch that once would have extended around the castle. It did indeed look a most attractive castle, built under the direction of Thomas Treffry (a prominent local businessman and politician) in a clover-leaf design that was originally surrounded by octagonal outer defences. Apparently, the drawbridge doubled up as a clover leaf stalk? Dedication!

Kastel Lannvowshedh, to honour it with its Cornish name, is particularly interesting because of its elaborate embellishments. Unlike Pendennis Castle, it was hardly developed after its completion, which meant that carved Latin inscriptions praising King Henry VIII were still in good condition. In fact, we soon noticed one such inscription in Latin above the main entrance: "Semper Honos Henrice Tuus Laudesque Manebunt", meaning "Henry, thy honour and praises will remain forever" - especially if left untouched by further developments?



Over the bridge (photo by Alan Santillo)



Latin inscription between gargoyles above crest (photo by Alan Santillo)

Having traversed the bridge, we entered the four-storey central tower built from slate stone rubble, with granite features and detailing. The central tower was the core of the clover-leaf design surrounded by three large circular bastions, which allowed for multiple layers of artillery. The tower was 47 feet/14 metres across and 44 feet/13 metres high, with walls an impressive 8 feet/2.4 metres thick. It wasn't enormous, but it was very ... neat.

The basement had originally been used as a kitchen and storerooms, while the first floor had been subdivided and used by the garrison, before later being used for storing gunpowder. We'd entered the central tower over the bridge and straight into the second storey, which had originally contained four rooms with windows and fireplaces, linked by a central corridor. This area may have been used by the castle's officers and also perhaps to house a larger garrison in times of emergency.

The third floor was a large, single room with gun embrasures and had most likely been used as living accommodation by the garrison. On the fourth floor above, the gun platform with its parapet (a barrier that's an extension of the wall at the edge of a roof or similar, as I needed to remind myself) could support up to seven guns and also sported a lookout turret. St Mawes had been designed to mount heavy 'ship sinking' guns, which of course makes great sense in such a coastal location. All this was topped by a 17th century cupola that was cleverly designed to act as a daymark, guiding passing ships.

The audio guide made the whole visit much more enjoyable and interesting, as it described both the castle and the history in an easily understood way. More than that, it 'spoke' in the voice of the castle's captain at the time of the possible invasion and beyond, from my ancestral Vyvyan/Vivian family (what's in a spelling, especially way back then!) I was tickled pink, to use an old and slightly unseemly expression, to think I could trace the link from my great grandmother back to the captains of St Mawes Castle.

As ever, it was the history I found of most interest as we wandered around, with some lifelike models in the central tower helping to portray the scene. The castle was decorated here and there with carved sea monsters and gargoyles, as well as heraldic shields that would originally have been painted and visible from the river. Henry VIII was all for a bit of show, despite the urgency for protection against the alliance of France and Spain, the two countries which the Pope was encouraging to attack England.



Watchful & unwatchful in the central tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

Henry's response of building coastal defences was rather oddly named 'The Device'. These Device forts ranged from large stone castles to small blockhouses and earthwork bulwarks, designed to house artillery that would be used against enemy ships before they could either attack vessels in harbour, or land forces. The castles were commanded by captains appointed by the Crown, who would oversee small garrisons of professional soldiers and gunners, which would be joined by local militia in an emergency. Much of the expense incurred for all this Device work was paid for from proceeds of the Dissolution of the Monasteries...

St Mawes castle was initially armed with 19 pieces of artillery and its first captain in 1544 was a member of the local gentry, Michael Vyvyan/Vivian. I'm not sure what place this particular Vivian has in my family tree, but I do know that the captaincy was passed in 1561 to Hannibal Vivian (1545-1609), a definite ancestor. The next captain was his son, Sir Francis (1574-1635, knighted c.1618) - my ancestry continuing from a younger brother of this knight so bold.

Bold maybe (I've no idea), but also seemingly hot-headed and untrustworthy. He had become captain of the castle in 1603 and entered Parliament the year after. In 1612, he was embroiled in the growing insistence for effective anti-piracy measures in the south-west of England, having been accused of harbouring and assisting pirates. After more trouble in what the History of Parliament website calls a "tumultuous public career", he was involved in a dispute between St Mawes Castle and Pendennis Castle.

The garrison at St Mawes Castle had begun stopping and searching ships in Falmouth Bay in around 1628, which Pendennis Castle believed was a right traditionally theirs. After a legal dispute in 1630, Sir Francis Vivian ignored the Admiralty's orders to stop this practice. In 1632, he was dismissed from office, having been accused of a variety of deceptions, including claiming wages for non-existent members of the garrison. He was sentenced to imprisonment and fined £2,000, although the following year, he paid £1,500 of his fine and was issued a pardon for the rest. It remains unclear whether he was actually imprisoned, but at this juncture, I would like to point out that he wasn't a direct ancestor of mine!

In the historical meantime, it's necessary to travel back to 1558 and the time of the first Vivian captain, when a lasting peace was made with France. However, the Spanish threat to the south-west of England grew. War broke out in 1569 (during the captaincy of Hannibal Vivian) and brought with it the threat of invasion. An additional battery of guns was built, which allowed the fort to fire further upriver and the garrison at St Mawes was strengthened, so that by 1578 it comprised 100 soldiers.

The Spanish threat continued, with war being formally declared in 1585 and lasting until 1604. The arrival of the Spanish Armada was fearfully anticipated in 1588, but it obligingly sailed past. However, Cornwall was raided in 1595 by a small Spanish force at Mousehole, Newlyn, Paul and Penzance and then in 1596 and 1597, another Spanish Armada set sail for the Carrick Roads. Fortunately, bad weather put paid to their dastardly plans.



3rd floor gun room (photo by Alan Santillo)

When the English Civil War broke out in 1642, St Mawes was held by the Royalists. Falmouth played a strategically useful part in their supply route to the Continent and the Carrick Roads were used as a base for Royalist piracy in the English Channel. I can't help wondering why a stretch of water is named Carrick Roads ... but moving on (over water or otherwise), the war turned in favour of the Parliamentarians and by March 1646, a substantial army led by Thomas Fairfax had entered Cornwall.

The captain of the castle at that time was Major Hannibal Bonithon, who surrendered immediately with his men. The reason for this may have been large numbers of Parliamentary troops to contend with, war weariness, or generous terms of surrender. The shadier possibility may have been Parliamentary sympathies, but whatever the reason, the castle ended up with its guns and weapons removed and a skeleton garrison to maintain it.

However, when King Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660, Sir Richard Vivian (c.1613-1665), son of Sir Francis Vivian of the tumultuous public career, took over command. He wasn't impressed that his inherited garrison consisted of only 13 men, but a mere five years later upon his death, his son Sir Vyell Vivian (c.1639-1696) became captain. Sir Vyell (a truly unfortunate name) had no heirs and separated the captaincy from the castle's lands, selling them to the Earl of Bath - which seems questionable, but what do I know!

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the castle continued in use as a fort under the command of successive captains, operating along with Pendennis Castle. Britain's wars with France in the late 18th century rendered the defence of Falmouth critical and local militia were called up to defend St Mawes from 1775 until 1780.

St Mawes was once more garrisoned between 1793 and 1815 during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, with 10 heavy 24-pounder guns situated outside the castle on a battery that was closer to the shore. Things couldn't have been going smoothly, however, as an inspection in 1797 discovered that only one 24-pounder was serviceable and at the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the castle was being maintained again at a basic level.

In 1849, the Tudor office of the captaincy of St Mawes was abolished upon the death of its last captain and the command of the garrison was changed to a regular military appointment. No more Vivian captains, although to be fair only one of them had been a distant relation of mine - a 10th great-grandfather, no less.

After a time of relative peace, a fresh French naval threat in the mid-19th century led to a complete overhaul of the shore battery at St Mawes. The development of ironclad warships equipped with rifled guns had altered the situation and a new Grand Sea Battery for 8-inch guns and a magazine was built for ammunition storage. The old castle was used as barracks, but because it could only hold 30 men, it was generally used as a training base that was manned by non-professional soldiers and volunteer units.

Falmouth's significance as a thriving commercial port was recognised in the 1880s, which meant it was vulnerable to enemy attack as fresh concerns about France rose yet again. In 1885, an electrically operated minefield was laid across the Carrick Roads, jointly controlled by St Mawes and Pendennis castles. The 8-inch guns were replaced by 64-pounder rifle guns and supplemented in the 1890s by machine guns and modern quick-firing 6-pounder guns to deal with torpedo boats and mine sweepers.

Unfortunately, the batteries for these guns were discovered to be in not such a good position and another battery for housing quick-firing guns was built above the original castle between 1900 and 1901. Another downturn arrived in a 1905 review of Falmouth defences, which concluded that the naval artillery at St Mawes was superfluous. Its guns were removed and replaced at Pendennis Castle and St Anthony Head Battery on the Roseland Peninsula, overlooking the entrance to the Carrick Roads.

St Mawes was used as barracks during World War I and then in 1920 it was transferred to the Office of Works and became a tourist attraction. It was garrisoned again in World War II and in 1941, new twin 6-pounder guns were installed that were capable of rapid fire to deal with German E-boats and submarines. By 1943, these were radar controlled and able to protect the vessels gathered in Falmouth harbour ready for D-Day and the invasion of Normandy.

Along with other coastal defence sites, St Mawes was decommissioned in 1956 because rockets had replaced coast artillery. It was placed into the care of the state and is now a very popular tourist attraction run by English Heritage. I'll vouch for that. As a coastal fortification, its history has clearly been of highly useful strategic importance and it's a very handsome looking castle to boot - but it was time for a walk around the site...



Entrance to the Grand Sea Battery (photo by Alan Santillo)

Below the main castle, we investigated the complex of artillery positions cut out of the rock from about 1854 onwards and collectively known as the Grand Sea Battery. This was served by a 19th century magazine for gunpowder storage, with stone walls and a bomb-proof brick roof covered in turf. I once saw such a battery roof on Guernsey and thought it was a green wildflower roof for ecological purposes, but it was to help protect against incoming shells!

Just below the Grand Sea Battery was a semi-circular blockhouse positioned near the water's edge, but although its date isn't precisely known, it may be the earliest fortification on the site. It had thick stone walls facing the sea, but its rear walls were much thinner. It originally possessed four gun ports, one of which is now blocked up, plus an upper gun platform and battlements that were destroyed. Foundations of four searchlight emplacements from World War II can be seen beside the blockhouse.

There were marvellous views out to sea, towards Falmouth, St Anthony Head and Pendennis Castle on the other side of the estuary. As a fortification spanning the centuries, it seemed to be an exceptionally well-preserved example, beginning with Henry VIII's vision and then adapting to future defensive needs. It felt alive with history (which sounds suspiciously like an oxymoron) and as we walked around the grassed slopes that had been modified by successive additions of gun batteries, there were good views galore. Looking back to the castle, it was interesting to see the place just below the English Heritage flag where King Henry VIII's large shield once must have proclaimed his pride in his country - and himself!



Looking back to the castle

As usual, on writing about the castle afterwards, I've learned much more than on the day of the visit itself. This leads me to the familiar conclusion that another visit would be appreciated, followed perhaps by moseying along to St Anthony Head Battery, owned by the National Trust since 1959. One thing's for certain - for a coastal artillery fort, this one ticks all the boxes 😊



The lower gun platform (photo by Alan Santillo)