DOVER CASTLE

Castle Hill, Dover, Kent CT16 1HU

9th July 2019

For many years, I found it hard to believe we lived in Dover in 1975 and had only ever sat on some grass a little way down from the castle, without ever venturing inside. Perhaps we were broke, or distracted. Probably both? However, during a holiday in Kent, this grievous oversight was to be rectified and I was happy!

We set off from our accommodation at around 09:15 and arrived at 10:40, after having a truly unpleasant drive through Maidstone, a stretch on the M2 and then the A2. It felt undeniably good to approach the castle from the top road and easily find a space in the large, sprawling car park. I'd had no idea the castle is so huge, standing proudly above the harbour and major ferry port where Alan had once worked as a Radio & Electronics Officer on the cross-channel ferries.

I felt a mental tick on the bucket list as I looked out at Dover front and the familiar sea vista again, but since our focus was the castle, we hastened to the ticket entrance. Our English Heritage membership served us well, saving us from paying £18.80 each and after walking up to the castle enclosure within the impressive curtain walls, we were soon enjoying a cappuccino in the Great Tower Café.

Finally at Dover Castle

It was time to start exploring, having read briefly about the castle's history. The chalk of Castle Hill, with its strategic view of the sea, originally lent itself to massive earthworks, mounds and ditches and is most likely to have been the site of a hill fort in the Iron Age, or earlier, as the unusual pattern of earthworks doesn't appear to be a perfect fit for the medieval castle.

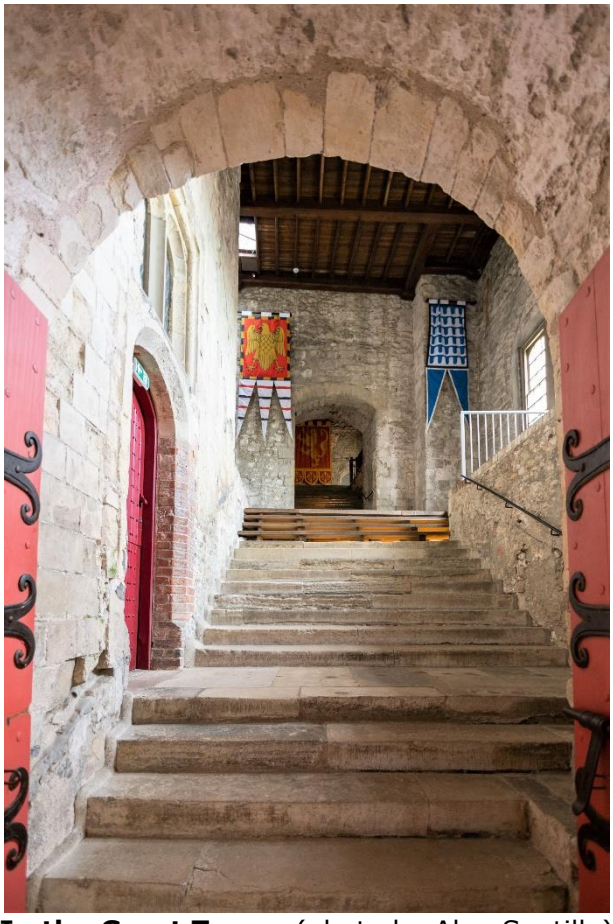
After his Hastings victory in October 1066, William the Conqueror (my 26th great-grandfather according to ancestry investigations) marched with his forces to Westminster Abbey for his coronation. They took a roundabout route, via Romney, Dover and Canterbury. Since the foundation of the Cinque Ports in 1050, it seems Dover has always been of high importance.

Reported as impregnable, Dover was being held by a large force at the time of William's approach, although the English were fearful. They lacked confidence in both their hill fort defences and the number of their troops and were prepared to surrender unconditionally. The Normans had other plans and set the castle on fire, so that it was soon enveloped by flames.

William thus took possession of the castle, paying for its repair and spending eight days adding new fortifications. Just eight days? He must have had a great deal of help. It was first built completely out of clay, but unsurprisingly fell to the ground, where the clay was then used as flooring for many of the rooms. The defences were subsequently strengthened and developed with an earthwork and timber-stockaded castle. In 1088, eight knights were appointed to guard Dover Castle, which was garrisoned without interruption until 1958 – a commendable history.

During the reign of King Henry II (1154-1189), the castle was remodelled and updated. The inner and outer baileys and the great keep/tower date from this time. From 1179 to 1188, the outlay was more than £6,500, which was an enormous sum considering the king's annual revenue was around £10,000.

The great tower doubled as added fortification and a palace in which to entertain important visitors. It was 83 feet/25.3 metres high, just short of 100 feet/30 metres square and had walls up to 21 feet/6.5 metres thick. There were three floors of rooms, with the topmost being state apartments for the king. It was hard to miss the aptly named Great Tower – and we didn't:



In the Great Tower (photo by Alan Santillo)

I hadn't managed much pre-visit research, but it was obvious that a great deal of effort had gone into re-creating a medieval royal palace, with richly-coloured wall hangings, furniture and furnishings in the banqueting hall and bedchambers. There was a lot to look at and despite a purposeful absence of information panels, I was entranced by the atmosphere.

Sumptuous (photo by Alan Santillo)

I was surprised at the extreme colour of many articles and furnishings. Combined with dim lighting in the rooms and the austere nature of the castle building itself, the colour seemed incongruous, but at the same time it gave a good impression of how a building was brought to life when the king and his royal retinue arrived.

Colourful chair in front of a blackened fireplace

Despite the prominent sumptuousness of the grander royal rooms, there were a number of practical storerooms and other sparsely furnished 'working rooms' to show how this had of necessity been a fully functioning castle. It indicated how life had been a whole lot harder for the workers.

A more basic room for the castle workers

I was also delighted to spot some graffiti on the stone walls. It seemed to vary in style, typically consisting of names and dates, but there were other areas of intriguing etchings, patterns and shapes. Some of it was quite deeply cut into the wall, with the apparent majority of it dating back to the 1700s, when the keep had been used as a military prison.

Graffiti

On the second floor, there was a dimly lit chapel dedicated to Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1162, who in 1170 had been slaughtered in front of the altar at Canterbury Cathedral by four of King Henry II's household knights.

It's presumed that in order to counter a quickly growing cult dedicated to the martyred Thomas, King Henry II had strategically invested in the chapel with its richly decorated stonework. It certainly exuded some uniquely historic vibes.

The chapel dedicated to Thomas Becket (photo by Alan Santillo)

Then there were the medieval tunnels! In 1216, during the reign of the dastardly King John (1166-1216, reign from 1199), a group of rebel barons rose up in arms against him and invited the future Louis VIII of France to come and seize the English crown. They had the backing of much of the populace and in May, many towns and castles in south-east England warmly greeted Louis' arrival in Kent, along with his large army. Louis was even proclaimed king in St Paul's Cathedral, but Dover Castle remained defiant.

The castle was held for King John by Hubert de Burgh, Justiciar of England, who was an Englishman from Norfolk, rather than one of King John's hated foreign mercenaries. Hubert was experienced in defending fortresses and led the garrison of 140 knights and many more soldiers in repulsing all attempts to take the castle.

A full-on bombardment ensued in July, involving siege engines, crossbowmen and miners undermining the stockade. This resulted in the French attackers severely damaging the barbican and the main gate at the northern end.

It led Louis to believe he had all but succeeded, as well as others who came to pay him homage, including the King of Scotland. However, when further tunnelling under the twin-towered stone gatehouse resulted in one tower crashing down, the French were driven out by the English as they mounted a full-scale assault on the breach. The English had been prepared…

Louis was shocked and set about starving the defenders, while threatening to hang every last one of them. The garrison managed to hold out until October, when a truce was agreed. Four days later, though, King John died and although Louis pressed for surrender, Hubert refused and vowed to hold the castle for John's heir, nine-year old Henry III (1207-72). Dover was temporarily left in peace when Louis departed for easier targets, leaving a token force behind.

It was reported that the truce was kept badly, with the Dover garrison becoming the centre of an English resistance movement. French supply ships were seized, while archers raised by a Kentish squire ambushed French land convoys. Louis himself was even attacked, which led to his decision that Dover Castle must be taken. In May 1217, a massive trebuchet siege engine was brought from France, but even that failed to make an impact.

The situation for Louis deteriorated further, when the news came that his main army and its allies had been beaten by William Marshal, 1st Earl of Pembroke (1146-1219), who at the time was acting as regent for the boy-king Henry III. The trebuchet was dismantled and the siege abandoned.

Three months later, Louis' fleet was destroyed a few miles out of Dover, with Hubert de Burgh's ship leading the attack, thus putting an end to Louis' hopes and what later became known as the First Barons' War.

After the siege, necessary repairs were made and a new barbican was linked to the castle by a cleverly designed system of underground tunnels that allowed defenders to defend the barbican – the tunnels we now found ourselves in.

As we attempted to explore the dank eeriness of the tunnels winding through the bedrock, we were assailed by group after group of swarming schoolchildren. I truly think it's marvellous for children to visit places that will greatly aid their learning, but unfortunately it can sometimes be to the detriment of paying visitors who might have travelled a long way and will never go that far again. The noise they generate is one thing, but the lack of regard they tend to show for others/elders, especially in places with uneven floors and winding staircases, can be dangerous.

Children loved charging through the tunnels...

Back to those rebellious barons and another period of conflict between 1264 and 1267, which was later known as the Second Barons' War. This time they were dissatisfied with King Henry III, because they believed he was giving too much influence to foreign relatives of the royal family.

Simon de Montfort, 6th Earl of Leicester (1208-1265), had become the leader of the baronial opposition and in 1264, he also became the de facto ruler of England when King Henry III and his son, the future King Edward I (1239-1307, reign from 1272), were captured at the Battle of Lewes.

A key player in this revolt was Simon de Montfort's wife Eleanor, who also happened to be the sister of King Henry III. She was not the stereotypical submissive female of the era and during the early part of her husband's regime, she networked with supporters and oversaw communications between her husband and sons, as well as housing prisoners.

She had been working from her manor of Odiham in Hampshire, but when Prince Edward escaped from captivity in May 1265, she moved to Dover Castle for greater security. Unfortunately, her husband and eldest son were killed at the Battle of Evesham, leaving her in a risky position. As a prominent member of the overturned regime in possession of the strategically placed Dover Castle, she was a prime target – but she refused to surrender to the royalists.

Eleanor had already prepared to defend the castle by bringing in a siege engine, but life was undoubtedly difficult. Food was hard to come by and 14 royalist prisoners being held in the great tower persuaded their guards to release them. They proceeded to fortify the tower against her and hearing this news, Prince Edward besieged the castle.

With the odds undoubtedly against her, Eleanor negotiated a settlement. Her supporters received pardons, but she was exiled to the Continent, becoming a nun at Montargis Abbey, around 70 miles south of Paris. She died there in 1275. She must have been quite a feisty woman in those long-ago days.

By Tudor times, the advent and use of gunpowder in fortifications had superseded the old ways, but when King Henry VIII (1491-1547, reign from 1509) visited Dover Castle, he decided to improve and add to the defences. The castle more or less declined in importance from the 16th century, although it was still visited by Elizabeth I (1533-1603, reign from 1558) and Queen Henrietta Maria (1609-69), the wife of King Charles I (1600-49, reign from 1625).

During the English Civil War (1642-1651), the castle was held for the king, but was taken by Parliamentarians in 1642 without a shot being fired. Having known the castle was lightly guarded, a local merchant named Richard Dawkes scaled the cliffs with 10 accomplices and attacked the porter's lodge. They thus obtained the keys and entered the castle before the garrison was summoned. One has to give them credit for being brave … or something.

After our foray within the dim, dank tunnels, it was time to ascend to the fresh air at the top of the tower and gaze through the crenellations upon extensive views of the Dover with which we were once so familiar, looking both inland to the sprawling town and seaward towards the harbour and beyond.

View from the top (photo by Alan Santillo)

Unfortunately, it was up here that a group of eight or so teenage Germans were *so* rude, by pushing in to where we were already standing. There was also an incident with a pusher-past while we were waiting patiently in a short queue to descend the narrow stairway safely, after a group of people had come up. I was rapidly losing my faith in human decency…

It was lunchtime, so we decided to take our slightly disgruntled selves back to the Great Tower Café that was by then fairly crowded, but still pleasant enough to sit and share a cheese toastie and a granary roll. We didn't linger, though, as we could see visitor numbers were still increasing and we were raring to visit the famous secret war tunnels, open to the public since 2015.

When England had deemed itself under threat of invasion by Napoleon, with Dover a likely target, one solution had been to dig tunnels in the chalky cliffs at Dover Castle. This was achieved by 1803, when underground barracks housed up to 2,000 officers and soldiers. The threat failed to materialise and at the end of the Napoleonic wars, the tunnels were partly converted and used for a few years by the Coast Blockade Service to tackle smuggling.

The tunnels were then abandoned for over a century, until the threat of invasion from Nazi Germany. In 1939, they were firstly converted into an air-raid shelter, but by May 1940, the entire British Expeditionary Force had become trapped at Dunkirk/Dunkerque in France, in mortal danger.

The responsibility for bringing the stranded soldiers home fell to Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsey, the head of Dover Naval Command, which was strategically based in the old tunnels. Operation Dynamo was born and over the course of just nine days, around 338,000 soldiers in Royal Naval vessels and the famous flotilla of civilian boats were delivered home to England.

In 1941, a military telephone exchange was installed in the tunnels to serve the underground headquarters of Dover Naval Command. The switchboards were in use continuously and a new tunnel was created alongside, in order to house the necessary batteries and chargers.

It was a fairly steep walk down to the tunnels, where there was a queue for the next guided tour. We were in a group with some New Zealand people from a cruise ship and they were so friendly and polite that it quite restored my faith in human nature. After a cloudy morning, the sun was making an appearance and it was becoming hot, so I was glad when after about a 25-minute wait, we finally entered the cool dimness of the tunnels.

Unfortunately, no photography was allowed, but the tour was well-run and informative. We were led into specific rooms within the tunnels, several in which we sat down and watched a short film of actual wartime footage.

Some of the rooms were kitted out the way they would have been at that time, which brought it all to life, especially with the wartime narrative in the background. The staff must have been working on adrenaline, eating and sleeping in the tunnels and completing 24- or 36-hour shifts in dim lighting conditions whilst under intense pressure.

The tour lasted for about 45 minutes and we enjoyed it so much that we decided to join the queue for the nearby underground hospital tunnels straight away. It was even hotter standing there this time for about 20 minutes, but once again, it was well worth the wait. We were led to various tunnels that had been used for injured personnel and the narrative this time was the story of an injured army man on his journey through the hospital system.

There were stretchers, medical supply cupboards, wards with bunk beds and an operating theatre, as well as sleeping and eating facilities. During the tour, there was an 'air raid' and the lights kept flashing on and off to simulate the experience.

There were relevant odours to conjure up cooking and also in the operating theatre (after a warning that anyone who felt uneasy or faint in the operating theatre should tell the guide, so presumably this has happened in the past). It was fine, the warning itself worried me more than anything!

A concluding talk from the guide gave us some interesting facts, including how there were 3½ miles of interconnecting tunnels; there were originally ten wards and two operating theatres, but as the need for the hospital lessened after Dunkirk, there were just two wards and one operating theatre; and for a few months after the war, the tunnels had been used as a maternity hospital. We were then told we had to climb 75 steps to the exit…

We were tiring a little by the time we re-emerged into the sunlight, but still went to see a Fire Command Post and Port War Signal Station on the cliff-top nearby, as recommended by the guide. The building had begun life in 1874 as a gun battery, defending Dover from attack by enemy ships, but had been adapted for its further different use in World War I.

On the lower floor, a Fire Command Post controlled coastal artillery around the harbour, while a floor added above in 1914 operated as a Port War Signal Station. From here, the Navy was able to control shipping movements in and out of the harbour, communicating with the ships and other signal stations using flags and wireless. There was a certainly a great view of the harbour and beyond, ideal for providing warnings of attack by the enemy.

During World War II, look-outs posted there had been able to monitor the enormous volume of sea traffic during the evacuation of Dunkirk and Operation Dynamo. There had been so much shipping that they'd needed to abandon the normal procedures of harbour management and allowed the vessels to make their own way as best they could.

We hadn't yet finished with the visit, but were in dire need of refreshment, so walked back up to the castle, passing under Colton's Tower and stopping to take a people-free photo. This was the place through which Roman and Saxon (and possibly Iron Age) predecessors had once entered the castle. It sported an ancient and interestingly-shaped octagonal turret, but has undergone a lot of alteration over the centuries and its arch now apparently has an Edwardian look. To be honest, I'm not entirely sure I would have noticed.

Colton's Tower

At the now almost empty Great Tower Café, we sat inside for the third time and enjoyed a hot drink with some appropriately fortifying chocolatey flapjack, which gave us an instant energy boost. I was highly intrigued in what we were about to see, which I'd previously had no inkling even existed (let alone at Dover Castle) until I'd looked at the information leaflet we'd been given on arrival. It felt like a bonus gift on an already memorable visit.

It was an eight-sided Roman lighthouse – or pharos – standing on the highest part of Castle Hill at what is called Eastern Heights, which would once have guided Roman ships into the harbour below. It was originally one of a pair built in around 46-50 AD, during the reign of the Emperor Claudius and just after the invasion of Britain in 43 AD. It's thought the Roman army may have come ashore at Dover, or further along the coast at Walmer.

The remains of the other pharos can be found on the Western Heights. Dover is in fact a narrow valley that opens to the sea between two high cliffs and the two pharos (or pharoi, to be plurally correct) were situated on opposite cliffs. Sadly, nothing much remains of the western pharos, called the Breden Stone, or in later times Bredenstone. The area was once called the Devil's Drop, as it was where felons were hurled off the cliffs to their deaths.

Incredibly, the pharos at Dover Castle is one of only three surviving lighthouses from the entire Roman Empire and the most complete Roman building in England still standing today. Very close beside it stands the church of St-Mary-in-Castro, originally known to be the site of a Roman building that most likely had an association with the manning of the pharos.

The church and lighthouse are intimately connected (not only in proximity) as tiles from the Roman pharos were later re-used in the church that was built circa 1000 AD in the late Saxon period. In the mid-13th century, the pharos had been connected to the church by a short passage and used as a bell tower. As we approached the unusual church that looked as if it was being hugged by the lighthouse, the red brick and pale stone of the church, with the unique lighthouse so close beside it, was a rare sight indeed:

Old church and ancient lighthouse

We first went inside the church, which has seen many changes over the years. In 1226, King Henry III instructed that the church be repaired and updated, which included adding three new altars to St Edmund, St Adrian and St Edward, as well as becoming a repository of sacred relics. Today, several visitors were milling around the interior, despite the absence of relics (although I was feeling a little decrepit by then).

The building had been restored again in 1582, but by the 17th century it was falling into decay. In 1780 it was utilised as a cooperage and storehouse, but it collapsed in 1801 and by 1808 was used as a coal store. This ignominious decline continued until 1860, when the first of two Victorian restorations began. It was finally restored to its original purpose in the later 19th century.

As a church, it had always served the local army barracks and the army link was obvious as soon as we stepped inside. It was used as the Dover garrison church until 2014 and is still a place of worship. I confess that encroaching fatigue meant I failed to take as much notice as I would have liked, but I do remember that it had a character all of its own and felt very peaceful.

St-Mary-in-Castro Church (photo by Alan Santillo)

The sky was still remarkably blue when we left the church to investigate the lighthouse more closely, although to be fair, there wasn't a great deal to investigate. It had been made of Kentish ragstone, red bricks and tufa (a variety of limestone) and stands at nearly 52 feet/15.8 metres high and 40 feet/12.2 metres at its base. It was partially renovated in 1913-1915.

Peering curiously inside, the interior was basically a large hollow space, with evidence of five Roman levels that originally had a floor or balcony. According to some Roman historians, it may once have been eight levels high. A new upper layer was added in around 1430. As for the Romans, though, it was simply astonishing to imagine how a beacon of fire would have burned at the top of the pharos each night, along with the pharos on the Western Heights, to guide Roman shipping safely into harbour. Serious respect to the Romans.

By the time we'd finished taking photos, it was 16:15 and time for us to navigate our way safely back to our holiday accommodation, along the ghastly roads. After a brief foray in the imaginatively stocked gift shop (where I may have made a purchase or two), we bade a fond farewell to Dover Castle, after having been there for a creditable 5½ hours.

It felt good to have made it inside the castle grounds at last and it had been a much fuller experience than I'd ever imagined, with the tunnels, lighthouse and church. English Heritage had spent £2.45 million on recreating the interior of the castle between 2007 and 2009, so maybe it was worth our long-delayed visit. Over 365,000 people visited the castle in 2018, which indicates its continuing popularity. I'm so happy we were able to add to visitor numbers for 2019 😊

Farewell Dover Castle

Kay Santillo, 2019.